

THE FLICK

By Stuart Hopen

For Gina,

my eternal love.

Letter I:**June 16, 1990**

Dear Phoenix:

At last I have found you. You covered your tracks well. Like a professional spy. I hear you've completely cut off contact with all our old friends just to hide from me. I didn't know someone could be completely out of your life and still be important.

All right, the last time we met was the utter shits. But three full years have passed since the screaming match at the funeral ruined our last chance to get back together. You threw whatever you could get your hands on. Mostly flowers. Only the roses hurt, adding to the many pricks that have come between us. At least we distracted the mourners from their grief. Gave them something to talk about, beside what killed Jay.

Three years of Jay lying in the nothing but vacancy hotel, and all that time I don't know where you've been lying. Or to who.

Three years. Has Jay really been dead that long? What a life. We exist, then we exits.

I have a business proposition. Will you let me take a stab at it?

An opportunity comes to hand. We have a chance to write a movie together. I have a commitment from a major studio to do a one man show: writing, directing and starring. Plus complete creative control. Sound like a masturbation fantasy? But the contracts are signed. The money has been set aside.

Are you open to a joint venture?

I'm not interested in making up stories and telling lies to my

audience. I want to be completely honest. The most powerful experience I ever had was loving you. I want to make a movie about us.

I hear you're in law school. A lawyer?? You? I hope you will stop wasting your talent and take me up on my offer.

Ignore me, if you want. I won't stalk you. You don't have to be paranoid.

Are you seeing anyone? Not that it matters. Just curious. This is purely a business proposition.

Love,

(You mind if I use that word? How about just as a sign off?)

DIETER

Letter II:

July 6, 1990

Dear Die:

A movie about us? What do you have in mind?

A porno film?

Or a horror film?

Phoenix

Letter III

July 10, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

I jotted down the beginning of our movie. In straight narrative, something we're used to dealing with together. Don't sweat the technicalities of screenplay form. I'll deal with that later. When we've done the full length. When we get to the end.

Back up.

To the beginning:

June 12, 1984

A Ferris wheel tumbled through the night and rocked wildly. Threatened to break free of its moorings. Like all the screws in the wheel were loose, or like all the couples aboard were screwing in their gondolas. With supports painted black, the wheel turned a slick illusion of anti-gravity. Spiky neon flickered around its circumference. Sort of a flashy, cartooned fire. Heat in the air.

I found Jay Fortunata at a carnival. He leaned against a carnival tent. Ropes with flags stretched all around him. He struck an arrogant pose. Weight on one hip. Waist thrust forward. He wore clothes without designer labels. But his clothes fit too perfectly and never seemed to wrinkle. He projected wealth in ways that were not too obvious, except for a solid gold chain braided like a noose around his neck, a gift from an uncle linked to the mob.

When Jay saw me coming, he muttered, "Shit."

Jay suddenly pushed into the crowd. A tide of flesh. A sea of meat. Desperate to get away.

The smell of roasting sausage strong in my nose. Nitrate tang in my mouth, preserving its own bitterness. I followed Jay. Relentlessly. It had taken me two weeks of searching to find him. People bumped into me. Hard elbows, soft breasts, a shower of fingertips. The patter of human contact.

Jay groped for openings and gutters in the tide. The ripples and rippling of bodies. He kept glancing over his shoulder, like a mark checking for a tail. He tried to lose himself among the beautiful people, who for some reason were very beautiful. Like they had been cast to be very beautiful. Women's eyes followed Jay, keeping beat with the whirls and dips of the mechanical rides. Neon lit syncopated thrusts.

Jay was drop dead gorgeous as we used to say in the eighties with irony we didn't intend. Dark hair bubbled over his head like carbonated crude. He had the kind of pretty boy good looks and erotic charge that made other men uneasy. The male half of the crowd hugged their dates as Jay pushed on past, like he had forced them to make a statement about ownership and sexual preference.

Jay's bored and indifferent eyes met the stares he drew. Into the throng, he flicked a half smoked cigarette. Its coal still hot.

I had dropped out of sight.

Jay took refuge in the shadows. He froze there, almost cringing in front of a darkened funhouse. The attraction had been shut down. The word "haunted" hung on a sign, spelled out in dead light bulbs.

I surged up in front of him. Jay stumbled backward.

Jay threw up his arms to ward off an impending blow, but the blow did not fall. "Shit!" he yelled. "How the hell did you find

me?"

I said, "I've hunted you down just to let you know one thing..." For a moment, I loomed over him, letting him take in all the advantages I would have if it came to a fight. My pumped up frame outlined in neon. The extra height. The muscle. When Jay's fear peaked, I said, "I'm not going to hurt you. You are forgiven."

For a moment, his features froze. A cornered look. Then he brushed himself off, and puffed up his chest. "What? You forgive me? Bah-boom! Just like that?"

"You don't believe me?"

"It's a trick. To get me close. To trust you. And then, when I'm off guard... that's when you'll give it your best shot. That's when you'll get me good. You fixate on a vendetta worse than a Mafia Don."

I kicked down the door of the darkened funhouse, then grabbed Jay by the collar.

I said, "We need to talk."

Jay didn't want to talk. He wriggled in my grip, trying to escape, as I dragged him farther into the darkness. Dragged him where the crowd couldn't see what was happening. Where no one would hear him yell.

We stumbled into the funhouse. Found ourselves in the middle of some kind diorama recreation of a slave market. It was weird and terrifying. Lifelike wax figures. Captive statues. They stood naked except for their chains, glistening. The costumes of the auctioneers and buyers had a kind of old South flavor. But the slaves on sale were all women, and many of them were white. The buyers in the crowd didn't seem to be buying anything. The way they were posed, they just gawked. And the sellers didn't seem to

be selling. Just shouting and inflicting pain. Stiffened bullwhips hung in the air, caught in the act of cracking. I dragged Jay through the slave market and set him down beside an array of iron pokers painted to look red hot. I said, "You hurt me, you know. I was in love with her..."

Jay pulled at his gold chain like it was a collar with too much starch. "In love? With Karen? Would you believe there is a guy who disguises himself as me and takes my place from time to time? Would you believe he's the guy you saw with Karen?"

I pulled a joint out of my top pocket and held it upright. Like an offering. As if I was the one in the wrong. "You don't need to make up dumb excuses. I wouldn't sell out our friendship over a woman."

"I would. Maybe I did all ready." But he took the joint anyway. Sniffed it. Finding it within his standards, he stuck it in his mouth and lit up.

"It would be a sorry swap," I said.

"Swapping you for Love?"

"Call it what you want. Love. Or lust. Or a fling. Or that great eternal romance, the stuff of myth and fable. No matter what you think you have going with a chick, you can never be sure of what you have in fact gotten yourself into. Other than depths where there is no light."

Jay leaned back against a splay legged wax woman. She was chained to the auction block. Flirting with the crowd. Like the fire was something she craved. Jay accidentally knocked her head off. It came to a rest at my feet.

I lifted the mannequin head by long dusty hair that might have been pretty in its prime, when it graced the head of real woman. I stared into marble eyes, which seemed huge and alive.

Staring at me. The head and the gawking crowd made me feel like I was being watched. Like I had to perform.

I said, "Women's brains drive differently from ours."

"Yeah, their brains drive on automatic. Ours with a stick."

"Men may think women understand what we say to them. Just like women think they understand what they say to us. But it is like the time JFK said that he was a Berliner. He thought he was saying to the people of Berlin; I share your feelings, your sorrows, your hopes. I am what you are. The crowd was cheering. It's like that when you're talking to a woman. You think you are saying I am like you; I am what you are, but like JFK you are saying, I am a doughnut.

"The friendship, the deep rapport. One day, poof, it is gone! No reason" I pitched the severed head over my shoulder. "It just ends."

Jay took a hard suck on the joint. Too hard. The coal winked out.

"Think you understand me, Die? Think we're alike? Think I count you among my friends?"

"I have been the only real friend you ever had, because to the rest of the world, you are a mean spirited, self-absorbed asshole."

"It hasn't been a friendship. I would characterize it more as a competition, a drunken drag race in the dark on the edge of a precipice. We did it all. But now we've gone over the side of the cliff. We've fallen out. We can't away with anything more. I didn't ask for forgiveness. I'd rather get your revenge."

"I already got my revenge."

"I hadn't noticed."

"I killed you."

Letter IV

July 21, 1990

Dear Die,

I have changed. I have enclosed a number of recent photographs. The nude photo is not sent to shock you. I thought it was tastefully done. Nor is the nude photo sent to fill you with regrets. Rather, I have included the nude to illustrate how drastically I have changed. Gone is the foolish girl who chain smoked Balkan Sobranies while drinking the nights away. Gone is the girl who wore silver nail polish and blue lipstick to clash against red hair. Gone.

I care for my health these days, exercising regularly, and always to the point of pain.

I am trying to evolve. Maturity delivered me to religion, which I mean as neither joke nor metaphor. God has given me a new source of strength.

I feel God's gaze, a force of infinite curiosity, not so much watching me as looking through me, as if I had been plucked up and held to the light, a bit of stained glass that warps and colors perception in a unique way. Superlatives will not suffice to describe the intoxicating experience of that gaze, that incandescent draft.

Always compliment the bar tender when he's pouring the shots.

Law agrees with me, for it is vast and consuming and sterilizing. Perhaps my transformation is simply another version of my last suicide attempt.

You are trying to seduce me again. This business about the

screenplay--is it true? It is simply too fantastic and smacks of being one of your many deceptions.

I distrust your motives. Your question at the end--am I "seeing" anyone? You did mean "fucking" didn't you? It is uncharacteristic of you to use euphemisms. I am not "seeing" anyone. I enjoy being alone. My fellow students wonder about me, and suspect me of being gay. The intrusive eyes of men evaluate me where ever I go; when I run alone at twilight, when I read my bible or law book under the cracked shadows of a denuded tree. I am not certain if they stare because I'm pretty or an oddity. Symptoms of my old eccentricity linger. Something vaguely "artistic" permeates everything I do.

One of my professors says that he's never met someone so very strange trying to masquerade as someone normal.

Conservative clothes wreak a weird effect on my appearance. I make no effort to conceal the scorched, purple scars on my left wrist. A faraway, lost, but cold look frosts my eyes. Mixing my own perfumes (discordant, arrogant scents) I give a thousand subtle signals that I am not to be touched. Admired, perhaps, but not to be touched. Despite my beauty, I am not to be touched. I am like the brightly colored creatures of the wild who boldly contrast against the foliage, without attracting predators. Animals know, from instinct or experience, that brightly colored flesh tastes bitter.

I have had enough contact with the opposite sex to sustain me for some time. But that is not the only reason I regard men warily, the way a reformed alcoholic regards a bottle. Loveless fucking is too bleak an entertainment, while romance is too time consuming and uncertain. Both are fraught with hazard. In any event, law school commands all of my time.

Sexual anorexia has become epidemic, I hear. Perhaps it has something to do with AIDS. After growing up as a cold war child, under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, I am surprised to find the human race again threatened with extinction, this time by people who make love and not war.

What does it matter if I am seeing anyone? Why do you ask?

I distrust your motives for writing to me. But I am tempted by your offer. Part of me still prefers the artifice of art to the lies of law.

Though I feel like a fawn whose gaze has met the python's, I am asking you to tell me more about this movie deal of yours.

God help you if you are confabulating.

Phoenix

Letter V

July 27, 1990

Dear Phoenix,

Thanks for the letter. It made me high. I got off on your essence. Maybe because I catch your madness like some kind of venereal disease of the heart.

I'd like to pick up where we left off:

Jay stood up. He strolled, deep in thought with his hands behind his back. I followed to where the tracks of a roller coaster track snaked into a dark tunnel. At the base of the slope, across from the tunnel, rested a graveyard. Hundreds of crosses and shadows of crosses. Plaster angels teetered on headstones. Stretched by optical illusions and cross reflecting mirrors, the graveyard sprawled without end.

"So I'm dead? What, like right now? None of this is real?"

"I wrote a story about how I killed you."

Jay looked up to the level above the endless graveyard. The eyes of the mannequins gawked at him.

"I thought you had this thing, this code about only telling the truth in your stories, only things that really, actually happened."

"Here's something funny, Jay. The absolute truth of the matter is that you are dead, right now. Only now isn't what it seems to be. We're in a moment in a story, and in this moment, you are alive and I'm talking about a story where you are dead, but in the actual moment, you are dead in reality and alive only in the story."

Jay kicked the mannequin head, which broke through a veil

of softly flapping cobwebs.

"This is strong dope," I said.

"Take your forgiveness and hold it. You timed it wrong. Wait a year or so, then forgive me. Lately, I've been a few aces shy of a full deck. Because of a woman. Phoenix." As he said her name, he pulled hard on the dead joint. The dark tip sparked back to life and glowed orange. "She hasn't come out and said anything about what kind of targets lie in the cross hairs of her long range sights, but she's got that look... the counting up my net worth look. I don't know what to do. I feel like I picked up a live wire. I can't let go because the current has overwhelmed my nerves and my grip is locked. She is perfect..."

"So are you going to marry her?"

"Marry Phoenix?!! Me? Marry a psychotic, schizoid, nympho who couldn't tell the truth if the Pope himself swore her in on the Shroud of Turin? If only she weren't so entertaining. If only she didn't make everyone else seem bland. I would marry her right now, and she would destroy me."

"And that's your idea of perfect?"

Jay took a deep toke, then handed off the joint. "Not perfect for me, Die. She's perfect for *you!*"

He kept kicking the mannequin head, following it across the graveyard, off to where the roller coaster tracks twisted into the tunnel. A warning hung on the web. Letters formed by the headless bodies of Black Widow grooms. The Tunnel of Doom.

"You're trying to set me up for a swap, aren't you?"

"Keep the fuck away from me."

A wax faced auctioneer had fallen off the upper level, out of the slave market. He fell across one of the plaster angels atop the headstones, straddling her wings. Spiders had colonized the

auctioneer's powdered wig. He presided over the land of the dead like a judge with rigor mortis. Arm outstretched. Very stiff. Gavel poised. Ready to bang.

I handed the joint back to Jay. I said, "My poaching days are over. I am in love with a professional model. When you see her, you will eat your hand."

Jay looked at his right hand. The joint burned as he pinched it. Ribbons of smoke wrapped around his fingers. He said, "I haven't had that much appetite for my hand these days."

I grabbed Jay by the shoulders. "I'll bet my Grace is more beautiful than your Phoenix. I bet that when you see her, you will want to swap."

"No way I want you within snatch range of Phoenix. You can't even meet her. You don't even get one look at her shadow. I said I would sell out our friendship for a woman. I wasn't talking about Karen."

Jay turned to walk away. He carried my joint off with him.

"This love at first sight stuff isn't real. It is Chick pornography. Just like instant sex is Guy pornography."

Suddenly, a shaft of light stabbed into the graveyard. A glaring, brilliant, blinding light. About fifteen feet ahead of us, the dirt began to belch. Steam hissed through cracking sod. Two coffin lids flung open in unison. A figure rose from each of the coffins. A man and a woman. Naked except for chains. They undulated. They spun around on dancers' legs. Some compelling force sucked them toward each other. They moved like the smoke. Slowly. Laughing. Dancing. Toward each other. Their hair, long and silky and elementally platinum. Their skin, an unnatural powdery white that seemed to smolder.

Me and Jay fell back to the shadows. The couple couldn't

see us. But it felt like someone could see us. Like we were being watched. The whole event. Maybe it was all those gaping fake eyes on the upper levels.

The couple got caught up in foreplay. Laughing. Stripping. Groping.

Jay used the joint to light up a cigarette, as if to show he's not going anywhere. Was this couple acting out some kind of private fantasy? Was it a show? Something distinctly unnatural was in progress. Much too stoned to care, Jay and me just hung out.

"I like to watch. You like to watch, Die?" He handed the hot remnants of the joint back to me.

"Not since I walked in on you and Karen."

"I owe you a woman, don't I?"

"You owe me three."

"The old crazy days. I miss them. All the grand and elaborate hoaxes we pulled off to swap chicks, all the masquerades, all the confidence games."

The final toke poured into my mouth like boiling honey. I burned my lips.

Jay continued, "Phoenix wouldn't fall for our old tricks. She isn't like the women we used to swap... what did we used to call them? Potato Chippies or something..."

"Frito-Lays in the pass-around pack."

"Phoenix isn't like that. I mean... that's not the way I feel about her. Anyway, she is too smart to fall for our scams."

"So what does Phoenix mean to you?"

"Everything. Absolutely everything. The only trouble is, with Phoenix, you don't know what is real and what isn't. She doesn't even know. And that's what's so terrible about her. But that's what's so entertaining. I'm almost to the point where I don't

care if it's true, or real. I'm hooked on the way she lies. I don't want the real world anymore."

"I'll bet I could interest you in a swap."

"Not for anything." Jay folded his arm across his chest and let the cigarette dangle. "If I were a better friend, I'd let you have Phoenix. I planned to, at first, when I found out she is a writer. I figured she would be fun on a short-term basis, you know; that I would just fuck her for a while-- then let her become the great love of your life."

The couple in the graveyard swirled into each other like smoke. Muscle over wet muscle.

Jay continued, "But now I don't want to give her up. And I don't want to share her. Or swap her. I would not swap her for any filly in your stable, not even if you got Misses January through October and the Honey of the Year too. Am I being very much the asshole?"

A pink anus was staring me in the eye.

"So what kind of stuff does she write?"

"Horror."

Fake cobwebs and loose strands of cotton candy drifted through the agitated currents. More light penetrated the spread, shooting out from an unseen source. What the hell was going on with this weird fucking couple? They could almost pass for real ghosts. Stoned as I was, I still couldn't believe that. I wanted a rational explanation and decided they were role playing. In costume and everything. A fantasy of being dead and still in love and still in heat. Phosphorescent ghosts had been painted on the walls. Their smiles glowed dimly.

I said, "Horror? That sucks. This may sound funny to you, but I think everything should have a point. Be moral."

"What counts as moral these days?"

"I have a code." I coughed, my throat raw from pot smoke. "I don't sell out my friends for pussy." The coughing started up again, and turned into a hacking fit. It sounded like I was choking on laughter.

I stood up and walked over to one of the smashed roller coaster trolleys, to where it was teetering on the edge. I said, "You don't have to worry about me snagging your new girl. You have money, looks, brains, and an ivy league dick. You have a better car."

"Different women like different things. Sometimes the same woman likes different things."

The steamy platinum woman grabbed the man by his most extended point. She led him like a blind man down a back alley.

"Jay, fuck the last ten years of brotherhood. Fuck the adventures we've had and the way we've grown. Fuck the disasters, both the near and the total. I give up on our friendship. If it means nothing to you... fine!"

Jay dug his left toe into the ground. He jammed both his hands into his pockets. He looked uncertain, stoned, but embarrassed.

I had the strangest feeling of being watched. There, in the shadows, lurked a huge glass eye. A giant version of the gaping eyes of the wax figures on the upper levels. A cyclops, staring at me.

There were other eyes in the shadows, all around. Watching. Recording. Making me feel like I was being evaluated, everything I said, everything I did, especially the way I was spying on the couple. Examined. Judged. I tried to credit these feelings to the effects of the pot. Tried to shrug them off. But I couldn't.

Something was going on I couldn't figure out.

"You know what Phoenix says? She says you can make something turn real by telling it in a story. She says stories create realities. In a different universe, I am already dead by your hand."

"You don't really believe that."

"I do. I believe Phoenix creates universes. She is a goddess."

"Just a crazy chick."

"She is. But she is crazy in a way that would appeal to you, Die. She had a religious experience reading a horror novel."

"Lots of people worship Stephen King."

"Not like that."

"What, like a vampire Moses at a vampire red sea?"

"Phoenix has an even weirder idea of religious experience."

"A Frankenstein Shiva, creator/destroyer?"

"Even weirder."

I ran out of guesses. I had a spaced out look on my face.

"Look at you. You're fascinated. You haven't even seen her yet."

"Now I get it." I smiled deviously. "You're setting me up for a swap."

"I would sooner swap my life."

"Hey, what I wouldn't give to be you, Jay..."

"Yeah? I thought I was supposed to be dead. Why would you want to swap lives with a dead man?"

"Erase what I said about that."

"Okay... I'll take you up on your bet... but only on one condition. If you win, you have to promise to swap back. I have to end up with Phoenix, no matter what... even if she falls in love with you."

"Okay..."

“And another thing. Another condition for this bet... an absolute prerequisite.”

“Like what...?”

“If I die... like you said I was going to... if I die without Phoenix... you have to bring me back to life, so that she ends up with me.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do *that*?”

“You would have to give me *your* life.” A big cloud of white smoke poured from his mouth and rose to where it hung over his head like a comic book word balloon.

“The pot is talking...”

“We are both extremely very extra stoned.”

“So... if we swap lives and I am dead and you are me, then you’ll be the one who has to keep the promise. You’ll have to resurrect me. How is it supposed to end?”

Not far from us, the phantasms were reaching a pelvis pounding crescendo.

ooohhhhhhhhh mmmmmmm

Jay was seething. Repressed rage made red veins pulse in his eyes. Like I had murdered him, though he wasn't dead yet.

Uh Uh Uh Uh HUH UHUHUUH UHUUUH
 UHHHH HhhhUHHH
 Uh Uh Uh Uh HUH UHUHUUH UHUUUH
 UHHHH HhhhUHHH

The sounds of climax echoed over the broken-down roller

coaster track, up and down the sloping rails, all twisted and rusty. The sounds of wet meat smacking came faster and faster. The wrecked trolleys started shaking. One of the trolleys jumped its rails.

Pearls sailed through the air.

Jay said, "I was supposed to meet Phoenix at Nine. We could keep at this all night and it wouldn't change my mind, only make me feel worse." Jay leaned forward. "The old crazy days. I miss them, but they're gone. Too bad we'll never find out who won our bet. The time has come..."

The auctioneer's gavel fell.

The pearls splattered as they hit the woman's cheeks.

Exposed male orgasms are a commercial norm, generally referred to as a "Money Shot" in the biz. Money shots make money, for reasons beyond me. Coitus Interruptus is a leading cause of impotence.

Someone yelled, "Cut!"

Grips began to pour out of the shadows. Makeup artists. Audio jocks and the rest of a film crew. A gang of professional lurkers. Camouflage specialists, who infuse themselves into their surroundings so as not to distract the performers. To give them privacy in public. Now the crew was out in the open. The performers were toweling down their sweaty bodies. They all milled around Jay and me, ignoring us. Like we were ghosts and they were the only reality.

The cameramen were the last to come to the light. Video recorders propped on their shoulders. The true face of the Cyclops.

Okay, Phoenix. I'll give it to you straight. My film is what some people might call Porno. Yes, it will have fucking. They used to call them "art films". I like that term better.

For this opening scene, I'll cast my friends Bela DeBall and Gala Affair as the couple. Idiot savants, they're not much on acting or conversation, which is just as well, given the helium inhalant quality of Gala's voice. But they're great dancers, having traded intellectual function for virtuosity of movement. There is a musicality at work in their coupling. A kind of innate primal rhythm. They stay in sync with each other and with the sound track. No matter what beat is laid down after the fact. They don't think. They coordinate. They've been called morons and they've been called geniuses. If you subscribe to the new theory that a certain amount of cognition takes place in muscle tissue, he and she are the buttocks equivalent of Immanuel Kant.

Look at it this way. These days, you can't grab anyone's attention by being subtle. If you want to wake up people from their autopilot way of thinking, you have to shove an exploding car in their faces. Or a cunt.

Fuck pictures play with our heads. They cast a spell. Our blood boils. Hormone stew. But the image should be ridiculous. Balls and tits flopping up and down. Faces turning pimple red. Cushions of flesh colliding, shooting ripples through the jelly that hangs on our bones. A bloated worm with rigor mortis invading a splayed apple. Yeah, it should be silly at best. Ugly at worst. But it isn't. It's powerful. Sometimes beautiful. Always brain frying. It has to be outlawed.

Think about it. No other image can land you in jail.

I've had a struggle to get up to where I am at now. You would

not believe how hard it has been. The girls are the real stars in the business. Half of the shots are cropped that you can't really see the guys. Or not much of them.

Despite it all, I've developed clout. I have a few things going for me apart from the obvious. Some of my screenplays are considered world class by industry standards-- not that industry standards are what you would call high. Also, I've been able to attract a lot of new girls to the business. Girls who will work only with me.

Although I have starred in about twenty five films, most of my fortune comes from six films I wrote, directed, and starred in myself. I had contracted for a percentage of the profits, in lieu of upfront pay. Usually a guarantee of zero return in a gypsy industry. You want to know why there's so many sexual synonyms for being cheated-- like "screwed" and "sucker" and "stiffed"? The etymology traces back to unpaid porno performers.

But the deal ended up being fortunate for me. Each film has been recut and edited many ways. Various mutations travel the world. Dubbed all the way down to grunts and moans to keep them in the proper accent. Connoisseurs pay through the nose for the purest versions. Like cocaine. The most stepped on versions reach the widest audience -- late night cable.

Now seriously, in what other end of the film business could I get total artistic control and a big budget in just 3 years? Only in this end. Shit, better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven.

At 26, I'm getting too old for this business. Can't last more than another few years. Will you help me with the screenplay? I can handle everything else myself.

There is another reason I want your help in writing the script. Most of the major obstacles to wide distribution of this project are

legal. My studio became especially interested when I told him you were a lawyer. So I exaggerated. Do you think you can help me write a movie that can't be busted?

Phoenix, I want to write about us because I want to bring back the time when love meant something more than squirting genetic material into the air. I want to make a Fuck film that is a masterpiece. Even if it doesn't make the audience think, it will at least abuse them in more interesting ways than they can abuse themselves.

Give me a call and let me know what you think. Or better still, name a place you want to meet. Anywhere in the world. On me.

Love,

Dieter

Letter VI

August 3, 1990

Dear Die:

I am not shocked. I should have known.

They say that 90% of mental patients are either sexually or religiously preoccupied. It seems you can go one of two ways when you go mad. No wonder that we, who have danced so close to the edge of sanity, should thus diverge: me, to God; you, to "art" films.

The cockroaches in my apartment were drawn to your opening scene. They nibbled at the corners. They left brown pellets as a commentary.

Die, your screenplay proposition has tweaked my interest. To be honest, the large amount of money you obliquely promised appeals more than anything else. My Princeton education put a severe strain on what is left of my family's inherited resources. Law school tuition is an even greater strain, along with the sorry performance of certain investments selected by the trustee of my grandfather's estate.

How much of our story are you planning to reveal? Everything, absolutely everything? And exactly as it was? The truth? Are you going to show what *really* killed Jay? Would you actually show what happened to us the first time we made love? Does your audience enjoy near fatal events? Are you going to show everything?

I wonder what you are really trying to procure from me. Is it really a literary contribution to your script? After all the times you dismissed my writing as "introspective hysteria" or "prose so beyond

purple it glows in the dark."

Two cockroaches approach. One mounts the other. They are rutting on this letter.

The lovers in the haunted fun house serves passably as foreshadowing, but their gratuitous appearance bothers me. I'm not sure why. Perhaps because it is a disagreeable convention in an unfamiliar genre. Must we start out so soon with sex that does nothing to advance the plot?

As badly as I need the money, this project feels too much like prostitution. We'll find out if I am really the whore you believe me to be. If I end up collaborating with you, I may withdraw before we reach our climax-- literary coitus interruptus.

The brown squirted smear above my signature is all that remains of the rutting cockroaches.

I do not want to see you, Die. Not now, not ever again. I don't want to hear your voice. But I am willing to deal with you through the mail. I offer this and nothing else.

Phoenix.

Letter VII

August 7, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

Reluctantly, I'll take your terms, Phoenix. I would much prefer working face to face, or front to front, or front to back and back again. Like in the old days. Or at least do it over the phone.

I will take you any way I can get you.

We left off where Jay thought he had escaped. June 12, 1984. From there, I left the abandoned funhouse. Alone. I hit the crowd.

Then I saw you. I knew it was You right away. I saw your hair and the smoke from your cigarette. I wonder where I will ever find a woman beautiful enough to play you. Someone with screaming red hair like blood on fire. Someone who won't look like a fool sporting silver nail polish.

You started walking toward me. You were wearing a translucent Grateful Dead t-shirt with nothing on underneath, and a faded pair of ripped blue jeans held together only by long cottony threads. You had combed your hair piratically over one eye. You greeted everyone with a lunatic stare. You should have looked hideous. One eye staring naked and crazy. The other eye veiled. Your features were too fragile, your skin, too white. But for some reason, you were beautiful. Your nose sloped perfectly. Your lips were thin and symmetrical, and sweetly soft looking. Your legs had been honed in your youth by years of horseback riding, ballet, figure skating, karate and all the other private lessons that money could buy. Which is why your ass still looked great despite too much time sitting on it.

You looked me up and down, then gave me a smile, like you were composing my obituary in your head as a private amusement. Back in those days, you were too skinny, but in an interesting way. Like your intellect had burned all the extra fat off your body. You had that emaciated look that was so fashionable for models of the time. Anyone could tell, back in those days, that you were screaming for attention. By the way you dressed, what with the outrageous hair style and the silver nails. And the gold tipped cigarettes. Even though it was obvious that you wanted people to look at you, it was equally obvious that you wouldn't compromise one bit of your distinctive personality for anyone. You were dangerous, and crazy. Beautiful too. Venus, and Venus fly trap.

I think that the actress I'll use in the Flick will have the kind of body you have now, as shown in those hot photos you sent. You'll be a smoker and an alcoholic, but you'll have an athlete's firmness. The magic of cinema.

The old emaciated style appealed to me back in the early 80's, but these days it looks too much like AIDS wasting syndrome.

You said to me, "You're Dieter. I'd know you anywhere. Jay talks about you all the time. It makes me jealous, the way he really, really loves you."

"And you're Phoenix. You look like someone who could have a religious experience reading a horror novel."

"Haven't you ever been consumed by a story?"

"I've been burned by a number of tales."

"People lose themselves in stories all the time. Look how many have been lost to the Bible or soap operas or sitcoms. A tale can unglue the atoms of your brain. Haven't you ever been plunged into depths of absurdity and terror so profoundly disorienting that you laugh and tremble at the same time, that you believe whatever the

teller wants you to believe no matter how ridiculous, that you think you have gone mad. I have."

"That never happened to me."

"It will."

There had been many women I wanted in the past, and most of them I wanted in the past just as soon as the present was over. No one before-- or since-- affected me the way you did at that moment. Maybe it was Jay's hype. Maybe it was forbidden fruit syndrome. Or maybe there is something to this love at first sight stuff I always thought was chick pornography.

You asked, "Did you ever read The Castle of Otranto?"

"Never heard of it."

"The first Gothic novel. You would like it. It would make you laugh."

"Is it funny?"

"A scream, really."

"So what kind of joke was it? God? Or something weirder?"

"I'll try to explain. Horace Walpole wrote the book. While I was reading the book, I got a fortune cookie with the message: 'Life is comedy for those who think, and a tragedy for those who feel.' Curiously, that was a quote from Horace Walpole. He was as famous for his collection of letters as he was for writing the first gothic novel, though I did not learn that until later. The word serendipity itself was coined by Walpole. He had read what he described as a fairy tale about a journey to the land of Serendip, the former name of Tibet. The plot advances through a series of remarkable coincidences.

"Anyway... The Castle of Otranto begins with a wedding ceremony. A horrifying catastrophe interrupts. Before we reach the wedding march, before the organ plays, a helmet of gargantuan

proportions falls from the sky, very suddenly. It lands upon the groom. The wedding is off, for the groom has been reduced to pulp.”

“And the book isn’t?”

“I like trash. How about you? Do you get off on trash?”

“Sometimes.”

“The hero appears. Alphonso, I think. I am terrible with names when I’m drunk. He immediately begins to court the bride... who is no longer a bride... Who is she? I forgot her name... she’s now the unengaged heroine... Alphonso must compete with a ghost... the ghost’s name escapes me for the moment... not a name, but a title... the wielder of the weighty symbol... something... something huge... I will confess that I always remembered him as The Ghost with the Big Dick.” At this point, you started laughing. “His buried saber contains the promise of Heaven.” You banged the heel of your hand against your forehead, then snapped your fingers. “The Knight of the Enormous Saber.”

“Big Dick?”

“You don’t know whether to be terrified or laughing. But then the author invokes fantastic images, like the gigantic helmet, with its towering feathers waving back and forth under the full moon. You realize you’re supposed to be terrified and laughing at the same time.”

You looked me in the eye.

"The unengaged heroine ends up marrying someone else in the end." You laughed again, starting to lose control and balance. You caught my arm and steadied yourself. Holding onto me, you said, "She marries the dead groom's best friend."

My guy code thing was being sorely tested.

You said, “There is a line I have memorized like a prayer. The

last line, the line that gave me a religious experience." You recited, "Her grief was too fresh to admit the thought of another love and it was not until she engaged in frequent discourse about her lost fiancé with the man who had been his closest friend that she was persuaded to marry him..."

"I don't get your meaning," I said, though it was obvious, and then I added, "I mean, what does it have to do with religion?"

You looked at me, just looked, and I nearly had a religious experience, but mine was of the ancient kind. Not an organized religion experience, though it involved an organ.

You said, "I would have thought it was right up your alley. Think about what I said, it's all about swapping... life after death... a sexual fantasy... imposing a live lover on a lost one. A preservation of memory through a substitution... a transformation of flesh into artifice..."

"I got some other kind of message from what you were saying. I guess I'm not the religious type."

"I don't expect you to understand... I had a very personal kind of reaction to this sentence... Maybe it contains meaning for me alone."

"Maybe it has to do with the future..."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a thought I had... I don't know why..."

"I hope not... you see, I wasn't finished. The sentence continues... 'she was persuaded to marry him, *for she could know no happiness but in the society of one with whom she could forever indulge the melancholy that had taken possession of her soul.*'"

"I think I liked better the part about frequent discourse."

"When I hit that line, so funny, yet so profoundly sad, it destroyed me. It ripped away the veil away from my senses and

illuminated the unseen world.”

Jay appeared out of the crowd, suddenly, unreal and out of place, like a helmet falling out of the sky, or like a ghost at a wedding feast.

You and I were fixated.

Jay asked, “What's going on?”

You said, “We sort of found each other.”

Jay grabbed you by the arm and pulled you away from me. He said, “We have to get going.”

You stood your ground, pulling your arm loose from Jay's grasp.

Looking at me, you asked, “Isn't your birthday coming up? I know a good present.”

Everyone needs a niche. I am a bottom feeder. But because of art films, I am not the failure everyone expected me to be. My bank account bulges.

You say you've lost interest in fucking. I believe you. I'm not "seeing" anyone either--except professionally. Fucking has become a fucking empty chore. A job.

Here is the way I see what happened to us. We had something on the order of an erotic demolition derby, with enough atmospherics to qualify for romance. If not true love, then its nymphomaniac twin sister.

But then, something happened which I still can't figure out.

Just when things were perfect.

We could use it for the climax of our movie.

We had been living together about two years. Mostly

roughing it in Lovehollow. Sometimes traveling around the country and mooching off friends who hadn't allied with Jay. One night, after about a month of living in Hightstown, it hit me. I had just come back to our apartment from a hard day, and the first thing I thought about, before walking through the door, was the garbage. You had me domesticated enough to be worried about whether the garbage made it down to the curb. You had me hauling trash twice a week. Like a rhino being led around by his horn.

There I was, carrying a great, overstuffed plastic bag. It was the cheap kind you always used to buy. The plastic started to herniate. I could see your garbage gathering in little pouches that grew more transparent as more stuff spilled in. Little things overwhelmed me. Gold butts kissed by blue lipstick. A Fauvist reprint clipped from a magazine and hung on the refrigerator until stains wiped out the colors. Notes to me, ripped up, and left littered around the house for me to find like William Burroughs love letters. It just hit me at that moment. All of it, taken together. It hit me in a funny way. And I thought, there are many different women who could make me happy for the rest of my life, but they would have to make me happy by being different and being many. But there was only one who could do it by being the only one. The thought distracted me. The garbage, your stuff, started to leak out.

I had to wrestle the bag up into my arms.

There I was, hugging the bag of garbage, rehearsing what I wanted to say to you.

"Phoenix, you've done it to me. You've made me love you so much, I even want to marry you."

As if to answer me, the garbage bag ruptured in my arms.

Our trash barfed its way out of the bag with a big slushy whisper. It reeked of ash trays and moldy yogurt. A soft, wet mystery item plopped on my feet. It looked like some kind of grizzly trophy, something a serial killer might keep, something that could have been shredded cardiac muscle crawling with maggots.

But still, I had this feeling like a fish with a hook in its mouth. Only instead of worrying about the hook, I was like a hooked fish who thinks he's a lucky stiff because he has chanced upon what has to be the only earthworm hanging out in the middle of the ocean.

I ran inside and found you in bed. What better place than bed to pop the question?

I had to repeat myself a few times because you weren't answering me. Had I put you in shock? Or were you passed out drunk again?

The bed had been made with red silk sheets. Surely not for snoozing. I took it as an invite.

The sheets weren't silk. They glistened because they were wet. And they weren't normally red either.

Maybe I shouldn't have used the poker to cauterize your wrist. The scar would have been less ugly. But the red hot swollen rod was there in the fireplace, and the open wound...

The film could be about the cheating that wrecked our love.

I think there's a lesson in that for all lovers.

It will make a great "art" film.

Love,
Die

Letter VIII

August 14, 1990

Dear Die:

Something is up with you. Are you playing some trick? Are you after my secrets?

On the infamous last evening of our love affair, something very important happened. You know some of the circumstances, but not all of them. Wouldn't you like to know why I slit my wrist that evening?

You would lead me into a dark and unknown territory, a zone that required a secret reconnaissance. Rather than adopting a disguise, I shed one, truth being the lie least prone to penetration. I let down my long hair and ventured out as my former self, with red eyes of mystery and blue, blue lips.

I sojourned to the local smut emporium. Neon cursive advertised mini-movies for 25 cents. Lewd posters harried the store windows. One poster promoted Double Dipping, the adventures of a woman and two men. Another poster showcased the talents of an actress named Sonya Getz-Yeroxoff, in a feature called The Male is in the Czech. When viewed from the interior of the store, the posters glowed in mirror image, like the stained glass windows of a pagan temple.

No one seemed to be in charge of the premises. A number of middle aged male patrons wandered listlessly through the aisles. I was greeted by your business associate, Dewey Love, or rather a facsimile. I cannot say how closely the facsimile approximates the original, since only certain molded parts appeared humanoid.

Otherwise, this object, offered as a love doll, looked better suited for floatation than intimacy.

I perused the racks and confronted breasts of surreal proportion, eyes half shut in mock ecstasy, open mouths full of graphic promises and graphic fulfillment, and painfully punned titles.

Your name was nowhere to be found.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that you might be working under a pseudonym. I found you then, at once. Die Smiling.

Outrageous.

That is you, isn't it?

I noticed a pattern in your titles: The Sound and the Furry, Whore and Piece, For Whom the Balls Toil. You seem especially fond of Dickens: Old Whoriosity Shop, Tweak House, A Christmas in Carol, and Mate Expectations.

What are you trying to do, Die, reverse bowdlerize the classics?

I compulsively started to harvest videotapes, a random sampling of everything the store had to offer, but I avoided anything with Die Smiling in it. There were too many nights I lay awake tormented by visions of you with other women. I doubt I could confront the real thing on television.

I inched toward the interior of the store, deeper into darkness. Copulatory close-ups on flickered on tiny screens, like phosphorescent jellyfish in the sunless recesses of the deepest oceans. A thick male spoor hung in the air, and the heavy, choking scent of wasted secretions nearly drove me away.

On the rear wall, I confronted a gigantic image of anal penetration, an advertisement for a film, Back Stabbing Fox Hunter, I think. Or perhaps it was a promotion for hemorrhoids.

The perpetrator joyously swung a riding crop across the buttocks of his mount, a starlet named 'Tally Ho'!

In the course of my passage, I noticed a change in the expressions of the women on the posters and cassette covers; they seemed to be growing less smug. Their faces creased in worry, then distorted with fear. The open mouths appeared to be screaming.

I felt horribly out of place, realizing I had stumbled into a secret, vast, grotesque, male domain. Drained of virility, swaddled in their habits, the patrons seemed like abbots of a heinous sect, withdrawn from true experience, gathered in a temple of isolation to get in touch with themselves. Doors opened and closed in the palisade of mini-movie booths, a gallery of yellow monochrome splatter paintings. Rather than Love Art, it was more like Lovecraft. The horror of Chtulu's bared, gelid face created a cognitive shift, and thrust me into an alternate state of consciousness.

I had gathered a ridiculously large number of tapes to check out, too many, requiring both hands to carry them all. The pile came to my chin. Random tapes were falling as I made my way to the counter, but I couldn't bend over to pick them up without losing the entire stack. Then suddenly, someone came out of the darkness, out of nowhere. Before I knew it, he backed me into a corner where a medley of exposed pipes formed a copper cage. He picked up a fallen cassette and proffered it. His ice colored eyes regarded me with a discomfoting familiarity. I felt as if his gaze were stripping away my disguise, then my clothes. I had the embarrassing feeling that I knew him, but I had no idea from where. He scared me half to death.

Then I thought that it might be a student in my law school

class I had previously ignored. He was younger than myself. Not my type, usually, but tonight he seemed profoundly different from the way I remembered him. I had the feeling he had used his misspent and chaos driven intellect to finally extract himself from a lingering nerdishness.

One day, he will be wealthy, powerful, and he will marry someone like your old girl friend, Grace.

"I know you, don't I?" I asked, more than slightly embarrassed, but holding my composure.

He raised an eyebrow, and for a moment I thought I was mistaken.

"Phoenix?"

"You're in some of my classes. I don't remember your name."

"John Holmes."

"It sounds familiar."

"There's another John Holmes. A famous John Holmes. I'm not him."

"What are you doing here? Boning up on Constitutional Law?"

"I *work* here."

"I don't believe you."

"It is true."

I intuited a lie.

I said, "I'm doing research for a paper on obscenity."

"There are no papers due."

"Extra credit."

He eyed me strangely. It was a hauntingly familiar look, from somewhere I couldn't place. He spoke to me as one might speak to an old friend, or a former lover. "You came here looking for a

kind of truth. Can I help you find something?"

"What do you suggest?" I leaned against the pipes.

"Most of the women come for Die Smiling films."

"The titles are stupid."

"He's funny-- if you can laugh at nonsense. His humor also resonates with a kind of pathos. He always loses the woman he loves. But for my money, I much prefer the work of his arch rival, Iream Insider, the Goethe of sex. Or maybe someone more exotic, Mr. XXX."

"You actually study this stuff?"

Holmes plucked one of the tapes from my clutches.

"Don't take that one," cautioned Holmes. "It is bad luck."

I examined the label. "Jayne Payne?"

"Do not even invoke her name."

The pipes began to gurgle and quiver around me. "Jayne Payne..." I repeated defiantly.

"Don't..."

"Jayne Payne," I said, without defiance, meditatively, curiously. A wave of parkinsonian tremors shook the exposed pipes.

Suddenly, a horrible stench struck my face with the force of a blow. It was the worst odor ever forced through my nasal passages; a horror, stinking of illness, blood and rotting shit.

Dark liquid streamed from one of the mini-movie booths, like a flood of melting chocolate. It was an outpouring of watery diarrhea which carried frank chunks of half-digested food interspersed with blood clots. Perhaps one of the patrons had lost control of his bowels, or had ruptured a rectal tumor, or perhaps the mini-movie was devolving to its base essence. Then black, tarry, bloody shit began to pour out by the gallon. A sewage

miasma spread.

I ran. Some force or intuition compelled me to escape. I didn't realize I was still holding the videotapes until the store's alarms began to bellow. Neither the alarms, nor the awareness of illicit goods in my possession kept me from running. Behind me, the other patrons were fleeing also, grabbing whatever treasures they could as their temple flooded with sewage.

Outside, I paused for a moment, contemplating my spoils as the others rushed past me with illuminated posters fluttering like banners. They had fortified themselves with tapes and love dolls and dildos.

I headed home to watch the booty.

Die Smiling.

You can be such a prick.

Phoenix

Letter IX

August 30, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

You say you're doing this mostly for the money, Phoenix. You draw time tortured analogies between writing and hooking. These are mixed messages you transmit. Other drives jerk your transmission. If money is so important, why haven't you asked your cut of the take? And what about the nasty details? The fine print? Very unlawyerlike. Very sloppy.

As I'm writing this, I'm lounging on the set of a three day wonder called The Fissure King. I'm tired of tortured pun variations of other people's titles. I propose we call our film "The Flick." A word that was banned from American comic books for years because the authorities were afraid the "L" and the "I" would run together.

There seems to be a concern about what kind of camera angles can be used so the audience won't see the warts around Dewy Love's asshole. It isn't my problem. I'm not the director. Harry Eleven is the director. I'm just hanging out as one of the working stiffs, moonlighting for Cream of the Crop Productions.

While Harry Eleven experiments with poses for Love and her partner for this scene, Mario Kundalini, I am thinking about my failures, artistic and otherwise.

June 16, 1984

At a yacht basin, we found a gaggle of sea gulls picking at something. They were snipping bits of flesh off a limp eel. Discarded on the wooden pier. Drying under the hot sun. Suddenly the eel reared its head. Snapping and gasping for air. Squirring back to life. The sea gulls fled in a panicked mass. Wings lifted up like a feathered curtain to reveal Grace.

That day, Grace wore a small bikini. Her body was slightly draped by a terry cloth mini thing that slit itself open when she moved. When her hair wasn't dyed for professional reasons, it was blonde. She wore high heels to go fishing. As if her legs weren't long enough. She glowed with cardiopulmonary efficiency, even though her rib cage jutted out in a way that looked like she was always holding her breath.

I wore a pair of blue jean cut-offs and a pair of sunglasses. Nothing else. Barefoot, I came head to head with Grace. I had my arm around her waist, to the chagrin of the yacht owners in viewing range. They couldn't figure out what I have done to merit such a babe. Not even they could afford the down payment on her, much less the monthly maintenance.

Grace surveyed the newly waxed yachts. "So which one will you buy for me?" she asks.

"Which one do you want?"

"The biggest."

Fishermen lined up all along the pier. No one seemed to be catching anything but eel. Grace walked past with too much of her butt showing. Freshly caught eels squirmed in the hands of the on looking fishermen.

We arrived at Jay's yacht, The Delta-Wave. We found Jay

fighting with his own eel. It wiggled on the end of his fishing line.

Grace said, "Poor thing," looking at the eel. Its jaw bone bent in a perpetual frown. A bloody hook pierced its lower lip.

Jay looked up at Grace, then turned his attention back to the eel. "They have good lives out at sea. Then they swim upstream and mate, and when they're done, they lay their eggs by the billion." He grabbed a small club and used it to smash the eel's skull. He threw it into a bucket filled with water. The eel quivered. The water turned red. "You can easily catch them this time of year."

"Why did you have to do that?" asked Grace. "I mean, you aren't going to eat it, are you?"

Jay settled back and lit a cigarette. "They're actually edible. Phoenix knows how to do them up right. I'd like to watch you eat one."

And then Phoenix began to emerge from the lower decks. Clouds of smoke preceded her. First I saw her hand, gripping the top rung of a rope ladder. Slowly, she climbed. I watched her. My breathing changed. She seemed to be smoldering. I sniffed her smoke like a perfume. Like I wanted to taste any part of her insides still clinging to it.

Grace said, "I thought you guys went to Princeton or Yale, or someplace like that. I expected you to be smart."

Phoenix responded, "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Smoking is not what I'd call a very smart thing to do."

"It's a territorial thing for me. Like a dog pissing out a border. And your objection to smoke, that's a territorial thing, too. As for being smart, well, that's the greatest part of going to Princeton or Yale, or someplace like that. People think you're smart and you don't even have to prove it." Phoenix grasped Jay

by the left arm with both hands and cuddled up to his side. He smirked.

"Actually, there's nothing special about me and Jay. I got into Princeton because I wrote some self-indulgent short stories that managed to get published. And Jay got in because of money, political connections, and relatives who break people's arms. Right Jay?"

"Whatever you say."

Jay handed Grace a beer bottle. She twisted open the cap. At her touch, foaming beer poured out in a pulsatile stream. Globes of beer foam hung in Grace's hair. Spuming gouts of beer spilled into white caps, the sea being whipped to froth as the yacht left the dock. Beer foam trailed our wake. Ghost droplets.

On a set covered with plastic banana trees and shrubs not ten feet away from me, Kundalini is losing his hard-on. He has the opportunity to fuck the fabulous Dewy Love. But Mario Kundalini is getting as much satisfaction as the poor slobs who fuck Dewy Love inflatable dolls.

Will the boys who spend their quarters to watch this performance in a sperm painted booth realize how dismal it was to all concerned? Who can figure out what drives boys to hunt porno in the night? The same forces that drove me to trade love for constant variety? Urges that promise genetic survival, but lead to extinction instead. What other kind of consolation can you seek when natural selection puts an end to you? Or puts too many ends to select from?

And you can't figure out which end you are meant for.

Or which end is up?

And you end up endless.

The crew immediately begins to hose down the set with disinfectant foam. Love rises from the plastic shrubs. She looks thankful as any working girl headed for a coffee break. She wipes sperm blobs from her belly with towelettes soaked in diluted chlorine bleach. Then she sashays off in search of more dope. Her overstated strut sets up a sympathetic vibration across the set. Plastic bananas, dripping foam, quiver with the same resonance as her silicone breasts. Kundalini skulks away in the opposite direction, trying hard to not to look like a man defeated by excruciating beauty. A manner of grief informs his stroll.

I am left with the uncomfortable suspicion that some reality lurks behind the legend of love. That it is something more than a different brand of sperm covered booth that eats quarters at a faster rate.

What have I lost?

Let's get the contract matters settled now. My cut of the action comes to 35% of the profits. Let's talk about your cut and how it can be shared. How about 17.5% of the film's total profits, just for your portion of the scripting. So your cut is equal to mine. Even though you are not directing. Or acting.

Bear in mind that there must be profits before there can be earnings. This discussion may be revolving around percentages of zero.

Are you willing to face the risks of a risqué venture?

I may not know law, but I know that a letter can be a contract. If you want, you can work up a more formal document. With all the coupled prepositions that lawyers get off on. For whatever it will be worth. Which is probably not much. Or you

can rely on this letter.

Be warned. Even in jurisdictions that don't routinely pursue obscenity convictions, the courts don't give a shit about porno contract cases. I remember how Feather Vali tried to sue Rugburn Pictures for breach of contract in connection with a film called Balled on Night Mountain. Rooster Rugburn, the director, kept insisting she do an anal scene with Huge Beaumont. Feather won't do anal scenes with anyone. She had seen how Saturn Exposure ended up needing a colostomy. So she put in all her contracts-- No buttfucking. Those words. Rooster wouldn't let up. Feather stormed off the set. She thought she had an airtight case. A signed contract as explicit as any porno film. Actual shots of Rooster on videotape telling her to crack her cheeks. The judge and his law clerks watched the tapes. Had a good laugh. Then dismissed the claim as being beneath the dignity of the court.

I have a lawyer friend who says that contracts are only as good as the amount of trust between the parties, anyway.

There's a shift of scenery going on in the background. Everyone is relocating to the set we call the Mink Boudoir. A carpet of fur spills over the base. A fur covered Victorian four-poster occupies center stage. Even the posts and end boards are furry. Fur pillow cases warm two plump pillows. There's a fur comforter over thin layers of fur sheets. Beside the bed, a fur covered vanity waits with a fur trimmed mirror reflecting a fur covered chair. The fur on the chair's spindly deco legs creates an insectoid ambiance. On the vanity rests fur covered perfume bottles, and a fur covered carafe of champagne, and two fur covered champagne glasses. The set cost a fortune. It has been used in hundreds of films. More than paying for itself. Various studios have loaned it back and forth many times. They've lost

track of the real owner.

Love manages to get her hands on another joint and lights up. She's getting more pleasure from smoking than she got from Mario. She lets him know it. She sprawls onto the fur bed. Samples the texture of the glide. She takes to the fur surface like a skinned cat reclaiming its frictionless birthright. There's a fresh jar of petroleum jelly on the fur covered night table beneath a fur hooded lamp. Love gives herself an oil change while shooting bald beavers at Bono Food, her partner for the next scene. Someone should warn her about the fertilizing effects of lubrication on warts. The spreads are not meant as a come on, despite their attractiveness. They are insolent gestures of self-sufficiency. Why do I not envy Bono? Harry should change the title to Lassie, Roll Over or Fetching because this film is a dog.

Love and Food are finishing their set. I'm up next.

Back to the old grind.

Love,

Die.

Letter X

September 7, 1990

Dear Die:

All right, I'm doing it. I want to put it behind me.

June 16, 1984

As the Delta-Wave heads out to sea, Phoenix sits by the prow of the ship, dangling her legs over the side, a figurehead lacquered by sunscreen. She comforts herself with her favorite drink, a black market liquor called Dulcet Lyre, a cousin to Absinthe made with wormwood and a touch of cocaine. She takes it straight from the distinctive green bottle in which it had been sold.

Die wanders over to her and finds her staring over the side of the ship, down at bubbling orange and red shadows under the surface of the water.

"You look bored," he says.

"No, I've been making wishes on fishes."

"What, on star fishes?"

"On dead fishes. When fish die, it is a slow, sluggish sort of death that leaves us to find them floating like water lilies. So instead of wishing on flowers, like the old women on the shore, I make my wishes on the corpses of fishes."

"Sounds like death wishes to me."

She lights up a cigarette, the figurehead beginning to burn.

He says, "Jay didn't tell me you were a writer."

"He told me he told you."

"Well, maybe he did and I forgot. He didn't tell me you were a published writer."

"I'm not a writer at the moment. College has gotten me lost and blocked. You dropped out, didn't you? Sounds like a good idea."

He touches his lips. She touches hers. As they talk, their positions subtly shift. Spines inscribe an alphabet of primeval signals. He reclines into a postural vowel, which she echoes as she leans back. Their clavicles align to parallel.

"I used to think I knew everything there was to know about writing, back when I was in high school. Maybe I am blocked now because I realize how little I know, how complex and difficult it actually is. When I look back at all my old work, I think it is heavy handed, pretentious, overly didactic. Too painfully derivative from Sylvia Plath."

Their postures, their hand gestures, their gazes hit a steady synchronicity. A ritual seduction is underway, through motions and signals inscribed on their cells; they are not even aware of it.

"I'd like to read it some time."

"After what I just said?"

"Sure."

"Oh God, that's like saying, I want to look up your dress."

"I'll tell you what. I'll let you read my stuff. You know, I'll you mine if you show me yours."

She rolls her eyes.

He says, "I didn't mean it that way. I'm not making a pass at you, honest."

"You were."

"I was trying to be funny. If you're that ashamed of your writing, maybe I could give you some pointers."

"What kind of pointer do you have in mind?"

Grace saunters over, in the company of Jay. "You two talking shop?" Grace asks.

Dieter shrugs, and the mirroring of postures and glances stops abruptly. The gathering lapses into asymmetry.

Jay, sits with his fishing pole in his hands. He had pasted paper notes to his line. These messages proclaim their self-importance through a profusion of exclamation points and urgent, bold characters on brightly colored scraps of paper. But they are written in Latin, which only Jay can understand. The high test line glows for a moment, then shimmers away into invisibility, after the manner of spider webs, making it seem as if the notes hang upon the air. The messages flap and flutter like little flags of obscurity. Jay pulls on the line, testing the tension.

When Grace walks past, her skin glossy with lubrication, Jay's rod inclines toward vertical.

Phoenix takes up a pole and expertly casts the line into the water, then she settles down next to Jay on a deck chair. As the couple trolls the waters, the boat rocks their seats.

Grace pitches a bottle of sun tan lotion to Dieter. "Do my back," she demands.

He pours the clear, slick lotion onto his large hands, then rubs it over her proffered back. A ludicrous bouquet rises off her skin, pina colada spiked with patchouli. Grace looks up at the bright sun, then pours some more sun tan oil onto her fastidiously

tended symmetry. She says to Jay, with a sincere expression of cultivated naiveté, "Do you mind if I take off my bathing suit?"

Phoenix pouts. She does not wish to contend with the disrobing antics of a sexual paragon, at least not in the company of these two men; one to whom she has laid claim, and the other to whom she has laid siege.

Grace continues, "There's no one else around, and I hate to pass up the opportunity to complete my tan. Of course, I don't want to offend anyone."

"I won't be offended," says Jay, suddenly straight faced, as if preparing to play poker.

Dieter says, "Go ahead."

As Grace strips down, Phoenix watches intently, even more so than Jay. She says to Grace, "God, you've got a beautiful body."

Grace says, "I work at it."

Phoenix asks, "So, did you get naked for us because you're really such an uninhibited nature child, or are you trying to help Dieter win his bet?"

The time we spent together flew by, powered by an engine or device of incredible potential, but one with the slightest flaw-- a gear with an improper mesh; a loose belt-- so that it could not withstand certain stresses. It was dangerous to operate.

I could not bring myself to write an explicit scene, at least not yet. What I wrote seems erotic enough to me, even without frank intercourse, but I don't know if it will meet your commercial demands. I feel like an intruder into this genre; as if I had

mistakenly stumbled into the Men's toilet.

These films are not about love, nor lovemaking for that matter. They are vehicles of climax. They are traps for servants of the self; they are bait for their masters as well.

The first film I watched, something called The Wizard of Os, caused an experience of a profound disorientation, as if I had been lost somewhere over the rainbow. All the players possessed a horrifying, inanimate quality, like the Tin Woodsman who sported a stove pipe erection. Their performances were stilted, their sexual movements robotic.

A man named Huge Beaumont sported a cock so enormous he had to wear a harness contraption-- supposedly to hold it up while he is on screen. But the thing was obviously made of plastic, and it looked like a prop from a 1950's low budget horror film.

Of all the porno bimbos who spread before me, there was one who evoked a spectacular revulsion. Over the course of a series of films in which she appeared under a variety of names (Bonnie Appetite, Honey Warmenwette, Purr Fuct), I watched her arc from an overweight teenager to a sculpted she-thing with a new nose, new cheeks, a new chin, and new breasts, more silicon than flesh on her bones. She had aerobicised off her baby fat, exercising, I suppose during what little time she wasn't under the scalpel or making porno films. She transformed from drab to beautiful and then back again. Eventually she settled upon the stage name V., obviously drawn from the Pynchon character-- presumably in deference to her artificial body.

After She Wore Only a Yellow Ribbon, I couldn't take it anymore. V. had obviously acquired AIDS. Twig like limbs, webbed with varicosity, extended from her hollowed out joint sockets. The silicone bags in her breasts had ruptured, but she

hadn't bothered to have them removed. She was having sex with a Nordic male bimbo who seemed oblivious to her grotesque appearance and obvious disease. I got violently ill watching the two of them.

Did you know V?

What can you tell me about the mysterious Jayne Payne whose invocation can shatter pipes?

How about Mr. XXX, a master of disguises? I am curious to know his true face. He must fit nightmare visions of your worst possible rival, your conception of my ideal man: a tireless athlete who can be anyone, or everyone, to provide the infinite variety you think I need; a fantasy of ubiquitous eroticism. I will tell you that out of all the hours of trash which I watched, this anonymous fantasy person was the only one who aroused anything other than disgust. I am intrigued by his musculature, and shudder contemplating the efforts it took to achieve such perfection. Like Lon Chaney Sr., the man provokes a terror that takes me out of myself.

This industry of yours fosters a process that transforms people into things; fetishes like V. and Huge Beaumont. Each film turns a live woman to an actual inanimate object-- something a man can possess and tuck away in a drawer, something he can have at his fingertips whenever he wants it.

Your proposed plot is too bleak and depressing. Your characters arc from romance to disillusionment, from lovemaking to fucking. You conclude by showing a woman broken by a stubborn masculine will, condemned for her infidelity, lost in despair and seeking her own death in the great Emma Bovary tradition-- only to have life tortuously forced upon her through the most painful means at hand.

Yes, I can see how such a film, all cocks and cunts and brutality, would appeal to your current audience-- the crowd that stays at home alone on a Saturday night, the palm wine drunkards, the dogs who chase their own tails. That is not the kind of film I want to write.

Since you have set the parameters for genre, I will set the parameters for theme. Our movie must be about love. Not the failure of love which brings death, but the durability of true love. Despite having you in my life, I still believe in love as a form of truth; I still believe it can happen.

I am willing to work on a film about you and me, provided we limit the story to the way we fell in love, the obstacles to that love, and the way we overcame them. I want to tell about how you were willing to sacrifice your closest friend in order to be with me, and how we would not let go of each other, even in peril of our lives. Those distant days.

Phoenix

Letter XI

September 11, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

I have written more in rough draft. Nothing I am ready to share. The rough draft needs a little refining. Parts of it are high octane and parts of it are crude. Parts of it are still dinosaur.

Not since Curtis Ensor turned down my first script have I been interested in doing a film about love. After you and me broke up, I came to the conclusion that love is too complicated a project for two people to pull off, particularly if you impose a standard of synchronicity. But O.K. Love will be our main idea. Our theme. You're going to make me use the L-word before we do it. O.K. If that is what it takes.

I do have my standards. Part of my guy code thing. I've never used the L-word unless I've meant it.

Even though I won't be in love with my co-star, your stand-in, that doesn't mean I won't have feelings for her. How can I describe the bonds between the players in my regular crowd? Think of the emotions between you, Jay, and I. It is something like that. Only without jealousy. The women in particular share a special kind of rapport. I'm not talking about sex. Of course, though there's plenty of that for business reasons. I'm talking about an intense bond they share. Which I won't degrade by using an inflated word like *love*. I care about these women, Phoenix. I'm not in love. But it doesn't mean I think of them as dick wipes. I'm pissed you called them bimbos. I mean, they're not *all* bimbos. (Well, some are bimbos with not much more substance than the

electron beams that reproduce their images on the small screen. Like the star of my last film, who has been making a nuisance of herself. She doesn't know it yet, but her screen name is going to be Erin Head or Penny Dreadful. There are days I feel like I'm surrounded by porno tapes waiting for me to buy them flowers.)

So some are bimbos. But some are hookers. Some are garden variety sluts. Some are lost souls. Some are children at heart. Out to have a good time. Some are college kids on a lark. Some are psychos full of dark, ravenous woman cravings. And some of them are damn smart women who decided that they would rather make half a million a year lying down on the job. From their point of view, it beats the shit out of law school.

By the way, Huge Beaumont really has a twenty inch prick. I know it looks like part of a rubber monster from a cheap Godzilla film, but it is the genuine article. It goes to show-- just because you show people something that is real doesn't mean that people will actually believe in it.

What lies behind the screen?

What behinds. Ah, what behinds.

My side of the screen and no apologies. My domain. Not just lies and behinds. Also, a kind of truth. The lays that teach us the truth.

I would give your regards to Mr. XXX, but no one knows who he really is. An insider, maybe, who crashes the shoots. Does his thing. Then splits. The word is that he's a crazy fucker. He subjects himself to intense pain for the sake of his disguises.

We have a saying around here. Be careful who you fuck. It might be Mr. XXX.

I don't want to talk about Jayne Payne. Your friend Holmes is right. She is bad luck.

Yeah, I knew V. I suggested that screen name to her. She used to wear a contact lens with the face of a clock over the iris of her left eye. Real name was Wendy Bergen. Final screen name was Ondine Undone. She invested heavily, both in terms of money and physical pain, to make herself one of the most beautiful women in the industry. For two years, she enjoyed superstar status. As you have guessed, she is dead now. From AIDS.

Toward the end of her career, known as her “Hi,V” period, she made some pretty ugly films. But there's a story behind those films that has a kind of sentimental appeal. Mark Scarabo, her main producer, let her keep making movies as an act of kindness. On the cassette covers, Mark pasted old pictures from the fox days of V. For a short time, he got away with trading on her name and reputation. Bruce Harbough, a/k/a Randy Member-- the guy you referred to as the Nordic male bimbo-- was willing to co-star with her because he was already HIV positive, and he could look past the mess that V. had become and still see something beautiful and desirable in her. Or so he said. Actually, Bruce will fuck anything.

I spend most of my free time with my fellow players; a core group made up of Iream Insider, Juanna Hung-Mann, Lance Alott a/k/a Hyman Ender a/k/a Hy Tail, Eerie Canal, Scarlett Fever, Babe Ruth (a woman) and her monogamous male lover, also named Babe Ruth. There's two gay older women: Mina Pause and Auntie Climax, who are legends. Oh yeah, and your favorite, Huge Beaumont.

As a group, we must cope with peculiar brands of stress. We hit the bottle, abuse drugs, over-indulge in all manner of excess. A high suicide rate whacks off our ranks, even higher than most groups at risk for contracting HIV. Whenever a member of our

troupe tangles with an emotional crisis-- which happens all the time-- he or she can call the others for support. It doesn't matter if it's in the middle of the night, or Christmas. We'll be there. No questions asked. We're really that close. I mean, we're all fucking each other for a living.

These days it seems like my fellow pros and I share the camaraderie of soldiers on the front lines. In the trenches and in the fox-holes. We who are about to die. We who may accidentally kill each other with love. Although we all get regular HIV tests, there is a window between the time you get infected and the time the test registers as positive. The Window scares the shit out of me. Out of all of us.

The board of directors of Fossil Bone hired an expert to talk to the troupe about The Window. She claimed that people don't catch HIV during the window period. That the virus hasn't yet built up to dangerous levels in the blood. She claimed we were safer screwing on the set than anywhere else. Because of our constant blood tests, we could be assured that no one had reached the infectious stage.

Sure, I understand she was hired by the company, and science has its whores too. She seemed to know what she was talking about. Her theory makes sense on an intuitive level. Particularly to those of us who have intuitions that are heavily into denial.

I don't know for certain. No one does.

But what the fuck. As Curtis Ensor used to say, "It's better to die of having than wanting."

Love,

Die

Letter XII

September 19, 1990

Dear Die,

I must confess, Die. I envy your bravery. Perhaps I would be as fearless as you if I had not stayed so close to Jay during his final months-- watching his hair fall out, his fragile beauty withering, his flawless complexion mapped by islands of Kaposi Sarcoma. In the end, the lips I had kissed so many times were fried to blister by Herpes Simplex. Although I am taking irrational risks these days, they all seem less chancy than love.

I am lonely here. The rigors of class assignments leave no time for extracurricular socialization. Even husbands and wives are torn apart by the gravity of this undertaking. Those of my classmates who are married now are not likely to be so at graduation. Although I admire the bright, earnest men and women who surround me daily, a failure of rapport persists through no one's fault.

Perhaps I have sought an environment that would guarantee isolation. Here I remain an obvious outsider, drawing stares.

After the legal process forced me into an insane asylum (something you should have foreseen when you abandoned me at the hospital after saving my life) I developed a healthy appreciation for the power of law.

Is this an acceptable alibi?

I need something to occupy the future I never expected.

I haven't finally decided whether or not to continue. As

always, you inspire mixed feelings in me.

And yet I have strayed from my class assignments long enough to compose the following scene. I should not be doing this. Am I being driven by the need to write and express myself? To explore my old, hidden urges? Or is it the lure of the forbidden? Am I trying to recapture something I lost?

"What bet?"

"What kind of odds have you two boys been laying?"

Die looks away, embarrassed. He mutters, "The stupid male in me turns everything into a competition."

Phoenix says, "He bet that Jay would think you're prettier than me, Grace. He bet that Jay would want to swap."

"I fucked up."

Grace says, "I'm not shocked, Phoenix. Die told me all about his naughty past. I'm flattered. Aren't you flattered, Phoenix?"

Phoenix says, "It depends on who wins the bet. So boys, who won?"

Dieter shakes his head.

Phoenix turns to him, "You brought it on yourself, Dieter. I want to know who won." She flicks the tip of her fishing pole. A shiver of tension flows through it.

Jay says, "Phoenix is getting drunk again. She sometimes does embarrassing things when she is drunk."

Jay is right. Phoenix is drunk and angry. Under these circumstances, she frequently does embarrassing things, though she is not the one embarrassed by them.

"Is anyone up for a swap?" asks Jay. There is spite in his

voice, a deliberate show of crassness.

"Are you up for her, Die?" asks Grace, as if she doesn't care; as if confessions of lust were as casual a matter as nude sunbathing.

Jay says, "Can I be honest? Everything depends on our being right on and true. Here's the truth. If we had gone through with the bet, Die would have won, because honestly, I would love to swap. I'm being straight up. Do you have a problem with that, Grace?"

Grace blushes. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say. What about Phoenix?"

Phoenix's line appears to tighten. Sudden jerks shimmer along the nylon stretch. Her fishing pole bends into a U shape and an unseen force pulls her out of her seat. "Oh, God," she screams, "I can't hold on." But it is all an act, a faked crisis. She feigns a loss of control, knowing full well what she hooked. Her line has snagged on the bottom.

Jay jumps up beside her. He grabs for the pole which wriggles around, under the manipulation of Phoenix. Her balance teeters. Jay stumbles over her feet and falls to the deck.

"Shit!" Jay yells. "Die, can you put your muscles to good use? Or are they just for show?"

Die races over. In an instant, he looms beside her. To take control of the pole, he must wrap his powerful arms around Phoenix. As they touch, the pole begins to gyrate with a new excitation. What had started as a lie now becomes an actuality. The reel screams. A genuine force, an overwhelming ferocity exerts itself and replaces the placidness of the bottom. Phoenix now engages an actual catch. A true fish, a large fish, struggles at the end of her line, though it feels more like she has caught the

world. Phoenix and Die are whipped from side to side as an unseen force propels the two of them savagely around the deck.

The force of the struggle pins Die and Phoenix against the railing. The oil she used to protect her pale and sensitive skin has left her greasy. She cannot help the way she slides around in his arms, nor does she intend the provocative placement of the cleft of her buttocks. It is not her doing, nor her choice. The two of them are wrestling against a titanic force of nature. They resemble marionettes whose strings have become entwined.

"Why aren't you reeling it in?" demands Jay.

"It isn't ready yet. I have to play with it awhile."

I'll end here, perhaps permanently. I see you again in memory, the way you used to be, so handsome and idealistic, full of funny illusions about love and friendship. I see too clearly someone who ceased to exist a long time ago.

Why won't you tell me about Jayne Payne? Your teasing angers me.

Phoenix

Letter XIII

October 2, 1990

Dear Phoenix,

I am going to make an art flick about our love affair. You'll either do it with me or I'll do it alone. I'll use whatever tools come to hand. If you want a say in the final result, if there's any ideas you want to put across, if you want more than my part of the story inserted, you're going to have to hold up your end.

The next scene is yours. The ball is in your court.

Love,

Die.

Letter XIV

October 5, 1990

Dear Die,

I am wet and I am cold.

For hours in my apartment, I sank into paranoia and depression, trying desperately to puzzle out what I am doing with my life, or rather, what *you* are doing with it. I feel as if I am letting you manipulate me. I feel exploited. Somehow you have made me responsible for you again. I still haven't figured out how I acquired this obligation to secure your future in your chosen profession. Nor do I understand how that obligation has compounded to include your future happiness, your ability to love, and perhaps your very life itself. It reminds me of the days I supported both of us, waitressing with my Princeton degree while you stayed home to write.

If this is a trick, Die... if this is one of your confidence schemes... I swear, I will destroy you.

I went walking in the rain. I wandered aimlessly for hours, trying to shock myself back to my senses, trying to shake off the suspicions that consume me.

The sky was varicose with lightning. I wantonly stayed out in the open anyway, just one of the many irrational risks I have enjoyed of late.

I don't fully understand why your thinly disguised misogyny has ceased to be irritating. Perhaps because it implies a lack of emotional attachment to the harem that replaced me. I wish I

didn't draw some private satisfaction from knowing you're as lonely in your own way as I am in mine. In between the lines, you are asking to get back together. The answer is no. It will always be no. It nearly killed me when I made love to you the very first time. I think it will kill me for certain if we get back together. I am not as angry at you as I once was. But I am vindictive enough to enjoy being asked, and to enjoy saying no.

Curiosity about Jayne Payne drove me to cultivate library skills far in excess of what was required for legal research. So far I've found nothing but scratched out entries and torn out pages. Who the hell is Jayne Payne?

My grades have already suffered as a result of the distraction you caused.

I feel guilty every time I stray from my studies to indulge in this intercourse; but this pornography project, as impulsive, foolish, and dangerous as it is for me, provides some measure of release for otherwise repressed emotions. It is a hedge against loneliness, and a compromise with my impulsive, artistic nature. Don't take that as a sign of approval of the film making process you've described. This lifestyle suits you, despite your ironic protestations; it is so funny and sad and repulsive and arresting. Your letters console me when the study of law oppresses with its tedium. Your letters console me when I find myself craving the companionship of fellow artists, and when I get distracted by unfulfilled yearnings. Your letters console me. They give me a glimpse of how low I might sink if I were to surrender to my old inclinations.

"Reel the damn fish in."

"It is too strong. I have to play with it until it is all tired out."

"It is a big one," says Phoenix.

Jay and Grace watch while Die and Phoenix share a prolonged embrace, the pole quivering between them.

"Resistance is all but depleted," says Phoenix wearily.

Finally, a splash rips the waters as Dieter extracts a blue and silvery prize. It was his toils that landed this fish; Phoenix had merely traveled on his brawn. And yet she feels the catch is hers, if by no other right than its attachment to her line.

"God Damn!" yells Jay. "Will you look at the size of that thing!"

The fish dangled above the waves. Later, it would weigh in at over a hundred pounds.

"I'd never seen anything like it," says Dieter. "It isn't a swordfish or a tarpon or a wahoo. Maybe it is what they call a Bone Fish."

"Bone Fish? I'm not talking about the fucking fish, Die. Karen always used to complain about your being too big-- but *damn!*"

Dieter blushes, a great torrent of maroon beating upon his cheeks, visible even under his golden tan, as he realizes how obvious he is in his wet cut-offs. "I'm sorry... I can't help it..."

Jay gives Dieter the gaff. He gaffs the fish. While the fish flips around and struggles to breathe, Jay searches through his tackle box for a pair of pliers so he can pry the hook loose. After a half a minute, he abandons the search, leaves the hook in place and cuts his line with a Swiss army knife. Using the line, he hangs the fish over the side of the boat, as if it were Hemingway's marlin.

Grace says, "It is perfectly obvious to everyone, even Jay and

I, what is going on between you and Phoenix. It doesn't bother me, Die."

"You are pissed off, Grace, for no reason."

"I'm not pissed off. Why should I be? I love you, Die. I love you a lot, but you know, there are two kinds of loves in the world." Her eyes narrow. "Those you want to only want to marry and those you only want to want to fuck. Yours is not the kind of love any woman would want to marry."

Dieter tries to act cool, though he is visibly upset and embarrassed. "Marriage, who needs it, when you're in love?"

Jay says, "There is a lot of heat going on between the four of us. What happens if you start out with a good pairing and then meet its match? All it takes is for someone to be straight up."

Dieter says, "It's a pretty speech. As you might have guessed, girls, it isn't new. That's the pitch we used to use, in the old days. What are you after, Jay?"

Jay shrugs. "I feel like I'm watching this scene from a remote place. It plays like a movie I've seen many times before. I see what's coming."

"Is it a porno movie?"

"Things will not go well for any of us if we are not totally honest right now."

Jay gambles his love for Phoenix, and ultimately, his very life on the next question. "Are you in love with me, Grace?"

"Oh, God, yes, yes, it was love at first sight. But yours is not the kind of love any woman would only want for fucking," says Grace. Everyone laughs, except Jay.

Phoenix looks away, out toward the sea, where the sun has scattered its glare over the choppy waves, a path of golden tiles leading to the end of sight. Almost absently, she added, "So what

trick will you boys try now, since this attempt at a swap has failed?"

Eventually I found my way to the law library, where I should be studying instead of writing to you. I am still very wet, shivering, dripping onto this letter, watching my words dissolve into watercolor washes as I write them.

The storm continues its rages. Thunder makes the books tremble. Lightning strobes through the windows, overwhelming the fluorescent lights inside. The law library has turned a flaming blue. The air is so charged, I can't touch anything without provoking a spark.

I wonder if you will be able to read this letter, given the smeared and running ink, and the quaver of my trembling cursive. Forgive me. I am wet and I am cold.

Now I am surrounded by books about obscenity, in contrast to my apartment, where I am surrounded by obscenity itself. These law books are as dull as the material in my apartment is repulsive, but the law books seem to provide an antidote for the strange mental states I've fallen into of late.

I have an answer to one of the first questions which you posed in connection with this project. How do we insulate it from the criminal law process? It probably can't be done. At least, not with any assurances.

In my constitutional law class, the topic of Obscenity arose last week.

The current body of law seems to have evolved from Justice Potter Stewart's oft quoted concurrence in the case of Jacobellis v. Ohio. He was probably being snide when he said, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kind of material I understand to be obscene, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so... but I know it when I see it."

In 1973, the case of Miller v. Arizona dressed Potter Stewart's methodology in formal attire and made it the law of the land by announcing the following tripartite standard:

"A. Whether the work taken as a whole appeals to prurient interests; and

B. Whether the work, taken as a whole, depicts or describes in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable state law; and

C. Whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, or scientific value."

Juries must apply this standard on a case by case basis.

How am I to write around such guidelines, riddled as they are with subjectivity?

My professor, Galen Weiss, presented the Miller Test in its black letter form, without opportunity for discussion. She treated Miller as the mere predicate for the zoning cases, which she then examined in great detail, and with relish. Pre-Miller cases were ignored. Post Miller cases were skimmed and summarized under the general rule that efforts to limit the application of the Miller Test have not passed constitutional muster. She stifled debate with intimidating attacks that went far beyond her usual pedantic brutality.

You must understand, the process of making attorneys has little to do with learning specific laws, for these can change at any moment. The real purpose of law school is to train students to think like lawyers. The experience more closely resembles behavior modification than learning. Teachers regard students in an adversarial manner -- treating them as ruthlessly as any future opponent will in the court room. It is a kind of academic boot camp. Like fraternity hazing, law school invokes rituals of humiliation and ego destruction that bond the one in control to the one being controlled, while priming a pattern certain to repeat. They bully away one's sense of individuality; subverting the self to a greater design.

The object of this conditioning is nothing less than the erosion of one's sense of morality.

I am quite serious about this. I said to my Jurisprudence professor, "I get the feeling that lawyers don't care what's true, only what works. Now that's an approach I understood and accepted back in the days when I was an artist-- but it is unexpected and disconcerting as hell in the context of law."

He laughed. "It doesn't matter what's true, only what works. Oh, I like that. Get used to it, Ms. McCullah-- because you're going to find it in every academic discipline, from Psychology to Physics, from Linguistics to Medicine, from Anthropology to Law. It doesn't matter what is true, only what works. It should be the intellectual motto for the 21st Century."

They play games with the law called legal fictions, blatant fabrications that substitute for reality. Law can be a synonym for untruth. Someone legally dead may be alive. Someone legally blind may be able to see. What is a mother-in-law? Not one's mother.

Lies that are true.

Like art, Law requires the willing suspension of disbelief. Law transforms reality through a series of incantations, a form of mask, a form of magic.

Instead of being seekers of truth, we are supposed to end up as advocates for our clients. Morality flows from the operation of the system, and our respective roles within the system, and not from personal bias, according to the party line. Lawyers then, are a kind of whore. Our respective careers have something in common after all. This is not to suggest some flaw or turpitude on the part of the legal profession through the use of a sexist metaphor. Bear in mind that the moral neutrality of legal training serves a broader purpose in a democratic society, ensuring that there will be a champion for any cause, no matter how unpopular. Otherwise, there would be no one to defend murderers, rapists, and pornographers.

You see, after a year of conditioning, I defend the system on reflex. Cold and wet. My hand won't stop shaking, which is why my scrawl is starting to look like the tracks of a polygraph test.

I am far more temperate in discussing my attitudes toward the legal system and lawyers in general when I am talking to anyone but you. You alone know me well enough, and all my secret hidden selves, to understand why I have trouble relating to my fellow law students. Or do you? Perhaps you think I should fit right in, now that you know this is a training ground for whores.

The law library cools my emotions, clarifies my thoughts. This was why I came to law school, to change my view of the world, to bury the person I had been. Ashes to ashes. I can distance myself from our Flick. I can watch. The past rolls past.

I find, to my dismay, that my involvement in this film may

subject me to prosecution for a wide variety of state and federal crimes. Any conviction would have a disastrous result on my intended law career. Even a well-publicized trial that ended with an acquittal would yield the same effect. Who would want to be represented by a pornographer?

For some reason, the risks make the project more compelling. As always, I test the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and as always, I do not stop until I have gone too far.

There was no mistaking the haste in which Professor Weiss turned away from Obscenity to the subject of Flag Burning. I know what I have to do. I will have to challenge Professor Weiss in open class for this omission. You have no idea how dangerous this challenge will be. Professor Weiss is formidable, and intimidating, no older than myself. While I was wasting my time writing trashy, unsalable screenplays and novels with you, Galen Weiss was clerking for Sandra Day O'Connor. While I was out trying to prove to myself that you were easily replaceable, and finding, to my dismay, that you were not, she was writing a horn book on the commerce clause. While I was undergoing compulsory treatment, and stoned out of my senses on psychotropic medications, she was arguing capital cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Under ordinary circumstances, I would never think to attack her on a point of law. But this is different. To a certain extent, we will be fighting on my turf. Of the two of us, I am sure I possess the greater knowledge of art and aesthetic issues. But she will be absolutely merciless.

I have work to do now, a lot of work, if I am going to confront Galen Weiss. My handwriting is no longer legible in any event. I can't stop shaking.

Soon I will have leave this light, and go back out to the dark
and the wet, to my apartment filled with obscenity and
mementoes, my displaced Lovehollow.

I am wet and cold.

Phoenix

Letter XV

October 11, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

What realm beckons to you? What lies behind the screen?
Whose lies? Whose behind?

We each have our own side of the screen. Separate. Alien.
How like seduction this is. I show off my stuff. You show off
your stuff. I try to grasp your perspective. You try to grasp mine.
I try to penetrate your angle.

You sound freaked by my side of the screen. But it isn't Hell.
I got used to what things are like on this side. I'm not going to try
to trick you. I'm not going to say it looks bad but feels good. I'm
not going to justify my side. Or condemn it. It is what it is. I
won't say I'm sorry for changing. For giving up all my old ideals
that you used to laugh at, but sort of liked. I just want to show
you my side.

But I won't tell you about Jayne Payne. Not yet. You're not
ready. It takes a kind of commitment.

Before you jump to your own conclusions about what lies in
my side of the screen, you need to know what my end has been
through. Maybe someday you'll tell me what your end has been
through. And what has been through it.

Let me fill you in.

To get to my side of the screen, I had to pay dues. In flesh.
A pound and a pounding.

Conventions had to be mastered.

About six months after we broke up for the final time, I landed my first gig.

Two things got me inside:

- (1) a referral from Jay's uncle Vito.
- (2) a certain arm ornament named Catherine Bell (now known as in one-handed circles as Scarlett Fever).

On the basis of a handful of half focused steamy glossies, we finessed an appointment with Curtis Ensor. The corona of Fossil Bone Pictures.

Curtis summoned us to a half empty shopping center in the worst part of town, where he kept an office. Now, this is the headquarters of a multi-million dollar studio with worldwide distribution. I had promised Catherine something swank.

Catherine almost backed out when she saw the waiting room. A carpet of dust covered the terrazzo floor. Nests of spiders lurked in bare plumbing up above. Sucked fly husks decorated the webs.

By the time we got beyond the tinted glass door that separated us from the main office, I was ready to find a desk set in a corner of the public urinals or something. But it was nice inside. Weird, but nice. It smelled like cologne and leather.

A life size picture dominated the center of the room. Curtis Ensor in the 1950's made up to look like Elvis. The photo glares at you with hungry eyes. His hair lies slick on his head. Greased. Just like his cock. A fifteen inch monument stretched over his washboard belly. The real Curtis seemed anti-climactic, aged, shrunken, bent with arthritis, seated beside the life sized picture.

Photos of Curtis's conquests lined the walls, like animal head trophies. Literally hundreds of pictures of him fucking different women. Your eyes sweep across the series. You can see how solid he was poking pony-tailed girls in the fifties. His gut started to sag around the time psychedelic patterns became the fashion. By the time Disco got hot, his mouth had sunk in and his lips gathered ridges of wrinkles. And when I met him, his chin had turned to a wattle. What remained of the black slick hair was brittle and white. In these sun faded, ghostly pictures, he gets older. But the women don't. Like the girls are Dorian Grey, and Curtis Ensor is the portrait. He always used to say, "You're as young as who you feel."

He sipped a glass of carrot juice. Flipped through the pictures of Catharine and me. Thumbed the corners of my script like a card sharp who had caught a punk using a marked deck. He said to me, "I can't use this." His accent stuck to his voice like sidewalk gum he'd stepped on in the Bronx. I didn't realize, until I met him, that he pronounced his first name "Coitus."

"But I'll give *you* work," he continued. I couldn't tell if he was talking in the second person singular or plural. His eyes wandered all over the room, resting every now and then on Catherine's tits. Curtis stayed interested in cashing in on them.

"Maybe you have no interest in me..." I said.

"I dunno, pretty boy. Are you willing to do gay loops?" He was acting tough. As was his style. Intent on paying bottom dollar for the assets.

He grabbed a bottle of bourbon from his desk from a drawer built to hold files. He took a swig. The filing drawer then yielded two crystal tumblers. These he placed in front of Catherine. Both were covered with lipstick rim-kisses of many different colors.

"Why don't you clean your glasses or get paper cups, or something?" I asked.

The bottle was then offered directly. And turned down.

Catharine said, "The only reason I'd even think about doing something like this is because Die wrote it. At least it has class."

"The guys who watch these films don't care about class. They care about Ass."

He held up one of the photos of Catherine's ass and licked it. Smacked his lips. Then Curtis continued, "Can you think of anything in the world less classy than sitting in a movie theater and whacking off to a movie?" He pointed a finger at Catherine. Then he pressed it into her left breast. For emphasis. He seemed to like what he felt. He pressed his finger into her breast a second time. Then a third.

"Don't mind me," said Curtis. "I still chase chicks like an old dog who chases cars out of habit. I don't stand a chance in hell of catching one, and I couldn't do anything with it if I did."

Catherine said, "I don't think I want to do this anymore. Let's go, Die." She stood and put a hand on my shoulder.

Curtis looked startled, not truly expecting to lose her. Not anticipating that there would be any issues on the bargaining table other than cost. There was no way he could know I had written the script from Catherine's confessions. In putting it down, he was putting her down.

He yelled, "Hey! Hey! Whadda' you gonna' do? With your looks, babe, no matter what kinda' job you take, you'll be doing the same as here, only it'll be boring, and it won't pay shit. Not shit, I say. Like it or not, an ass like yours will figure in any of your career moves. Work as a secretary, and your married boss will grab it. Work as a waitress, you'll have to wiggle it for tips. Your

ass can be your Bottom or your Can. If you think of it as your Bottom, it will lobotomize you. If you think of it as your Can, it will canonize you. Here you could be a star. If I were you, I'd stay. What would you rather have-- a dead end job fit for brain donors? Or a live end job fit to drain boners?"

I turned to Curtis. Lost my temper. "Do you have any idea what I had to go through to get her prepped for the camera. You have any idea how hard it was? How long she took?"

He measured my words.

To try to make amends, Curtis flipped open a new drawer in his desk. He took out a mirror, a razor, and a vial of cocaine. These he handed to Catherine. Like laying out the lines was women's work.

While she was chopping, he said, "The next time you bring me a screenplay, leave out the overwrought Ph.D. chicks..."

Catherine helped herself to the first snort of coke. It was purer than what she was used to. Immediately she looked sick. Overcome. I could see it hit her. Nausea.

"...and the coy allusions to French existentialist novels. You got to address the everyday joes, like my drinking buddy Fred the roofer, who says: 'Every Saturday night I pay five dollar to the bald headed champ, and the bald headed champ, he reward me when he puke.'"

Catherine looked ready to respond to cue.

I said, "To tell the truth, I write mostly to women."

"We don't sell to women."

"Why not try to lure them in?"

He laughed and shook his head. He turned to Catharine. "Tell me, would anything ever make you want to go to a porno store and stand in a little booth and drop quarters into a machine

that shows loops of people fucking?"

Catharine shook her head.

"I mean, would you do it if you could see Clarke Gable's hard on, or Errol Flynn's?"

"No."

"What about Elvis' hard-on?"

"Maybe Mickey Rourke's," she said.

"Men love porno because porno doesn't expect to be taken out for dinner. Porno don't want no promises, don't need no lies. Porno don't care if you got a little dick, or if you spurt your wad too fast. Porno doesn't give you diseases--unless you touch the walls of your sperm covered booth with an open sore on your skin.

"You think that's going to lure in women? Porno will not pick up the check. Or buy flowers. Or pay alimony."

Curtis' took his dentures out for a minute and wiped them on his sleeve. A tide of drool made his lips as shiny as scales. He flashed a smile like the pink, all-purpose orifice of a giant protozoa. "There's a scientific reason why men prefer no obligation fucking, while women get grossed out by it. It is an absolute scientific fact that a man gets the greatest chance for genetic survival by screwing as many women as possible..." He turned nostalgically to the impressive panorama of copulation all around him. "... whereas women scientifically need a man to take care of them while they're weighted down with kids." Then he winked at me. "Woman looks for one man to fulfill her many needs, while man looks for many women to fulfill his one need."

At this point, Curtis jumped out his chair. Suddenly he found a new vigor. Maybe it was the coke. Or the sheer love of his craft. You could see street fighting moves in the way he waved his arms.

"Bring me something like this..." Curtis began: "A pizza man stands at the entrance to the Gamma Lama Ding Dong sorority..."

And that's when Catherine puked.

To Curtis, the only guys interested in love are victims of an age old scam. In opposition to the scam, Curtis helped the male race find satisfying partnerless orgasms. Watching what their wives and girlfriends, or would-be wives and girlfriends, were doing without them, right now.

He was a new kind of junker, pushing his heroines to a new kind of junkee.

Hey, I told you this was my side of the screen, a domain of lies and behinds.

These days Curtis raises a crop of what garbage workers call electric rice. He got prostate cancer awhile back. In the final stages of his disease, the sin king sinking, he lectured to me for hours. Passing on a legacy of porno craftsmanship.

I was there when he died. Holding his hand. He was sucking on an oxygen tube as if it were the world's greatest tit. His last words, and this is true, were: "I'm coming..."

Curtis would have been disappointed by his funeral. The lack of mourners from outside the industry. No reporters. No celebs. But the event attracted enough old flames to make it a sendoff fit for a Viking.

What a life. Our affairs illuminate us, then eliminate us.

Are you sure you're steering yourself into the right line of work? I'm sure you are not. You know what they say about lawyers? If they keep making new ones at the present pace, by the year 2020, there will be more lawyers than people!

I need you.

Love,

Die

Letter XVI

October 13, 1990

Dear Die:

I will have my end covered.

Perhaps the next part should end up on the cutting room floor. I don't know how you will feel about it, but it seemed so thematically correct, and to my liquor addled memory, it seems to be exactly what Jay said. It feels true, though perhaps it is a trick of retrospective examination, a distortion caused by looking at Jay in my memory, and retrieving him into the present.

Jay begins to twist a clear length of fishing line around his left index finger. The tip of his finger bulbs out and turns purple. He eyes Grace and says, "I warned you. Somehow or other, it seems I know our futures. The moment feels weird as a halftime show at a wake. It probably has something to do with a writer's trick Die and Phoenix are trying to pull off. There's a plot between them. Don't ask me to explain. In a few years, we'll both be dead. We'll both be killed by Love." He continues wrapping the line over the length of his finger, then across his palm. He proceeds to crisscross the line down his forearm, pulling it tight, like a phylactery of self-affliction. In the cord's pale bite, his flesh extrudes outward. The bulges darken. "You, Grace, will be abducted by a wacked out weirdo. This guy, if he were ice cream, he'd be flavored psychoalmond schizocashew manicdepressive pistachio. You know how he got so messed up? Pornography deranged him. He views women as things. Pornography breeds violence. The Republicans and the Feminists tell the truth. You

get to find out first hand." He holds up his arm, now covered with plums of cyanosis.

Jay takes control of the scene. He seems to be speaking in the present, Jay himself, direct from Hell. Radiating charismatic energy, he leaches color from the surrounding sea and sky, until everything is either blue or its complementary orange. Jay transforms our reality to a flickering projection. Our very retinas seem reduced to a low grade film.

Jay speaks from a place outside of time, his words, in their utterance, alter what was and what is.

Grace lies bound on a blood soaked rug.

Grace lies splayed on a dissection table, the jelly of her inner secrets offered for viewing. Someone has stripped off her skin.

I saw her this way. It was real, absolutely real.

Did Jay alter reality, causing an actual death by telling a story? Did Jay do that? *Or did I?* For a moment I see myself as the pornography obsessed lunatic who murders Grace according to the prophecy. I have murdered her with this telling, just as you murdered Jay in a fiction, and then in real life.

Perhaps it did not happen this way originally. Perhaps these new words that emerge from Jay's mouth echo across existence. Things change. My past turns vile. It has become true.

If it is true, should we include it? Would the requisite special effects blow your budget? Drain your assets? Or will the actress who plays Grace be sacrificed for the sake of verisimilitude?

Jay implores, "If you don't reach out to me now, if you don't save us both, you'll spend days dying in pain and humiliation." He wraps the cord around his neck, purpling the pallor, making his eyes bug out. "I'm telling you all this to save your life. Reach out to me... You can do it."

She starts to touch him, but draws away. She shivers.

Jay raises his index and pinky fingers, in the sign of the horns.
And Jay begins to plot his other revenges.

Maybe now you will tell me about Jayne Payne.

Phoenix.

Letter XVII

October 18, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

You can't know about Jayne Payne until you take on certain responsibilities. Make certain promises. You have to commit. Not yet.

And...

I don't want scenes of a cut up corpse in the middle of my Porno film. You've grossed me out, Phoenix. I am sick of this porno creates psycho killers shit that Ted Bundy started. I do sex in my movies because I don't like violence. Every story has to have conflict or else it is just words. There are only two kinds of conflict. Sex or violence. You know, it has to be one or the other. Sex or violence. I'd rather have sex.

Grace had all the makings of a porno superstar. Years ago, when I tried to look her up again, she seemed to have vanished off the face of the Earth. Someone told me that she married a billionaire.

And I hope it is true.

But I don't know what really happened to her.

When I thought back on it, I seemed to remember Jay really laying a warning on Grace. Warning she would be murdered. Or something like that. Maybe you put down what he really said. Or maybe it is some memory you created by suggesting it. I'm starting to lose track of what I remember about the old days and what we've made up. And I don't want to lose the past. I want to catch it as close to the truth as I can. I know how much you like to

make up stuff. I don't want to fall into the easy out of making up stuff to fill in the blank places.

I'm trying to get the truth out of you.

A large blue and silver fish circled the yacht. It had markings same as the big fish Phoenix and I caught earlier. But this fish one was even bigger. It jumped out of the water. Hit the surface with a splash.

The fish submerged. Not very deeply. We could see it coming back. It jumped again. It lunged at the first fish hung over the side of the yacht.

"It must be his mate," said Grace. "Even though she's dead, he won't abandon her. It is so sad."

"She's mine, now. I'm going to eat her. He can watch if he wants," said Jay.

"Jay, his heart is breaking," said Grace.

I said, "Why don't you give up on this one? She belongs somewhere else."

Grace reached for the stiff, curved corpse of the first fish. Jay pushed her back.

"God damn it," Phoenix said, "It is mine. I will do with it what I damn well please." She grabbed the fish, pulled it loose, ripping off its lips. Leaving the lips dangling on the hook. Fish lips spinning. Phoenix and Grace watched the fish corpse hit the water. The two women seemed to be expecting the fish to come back to life.

The dried out old stiff just floated.

The second fish swam over.

Down in the water, their reunion beat up a lather. The activity was fast and furious. All we could see was the corpse dipping and jerking. Like some kind of tango was in progress.

Jay said, "Maybe it's love. The real, early evolutionary, fish eyed event, the electrical, neurological, the primitive, primal, stuff. Love. He's so stiff he doesn't care if she is too. He's been patient and now he's going to hump the shit out of her."

Now the gauzy foam let us get a glimpse of the fish who was supposed to be in love. But only his mouth. Full of sharp teeth no one had seen a moment before. The flesh on the corpse was disappearing in big bites. The comb-like skeleton, hung with rags of meat, sank into our wake.

Twilight. Jay dropped anchor not far from a deserted pine scrub island.

Grace and I dove into the water. Naked. Phoenix and Jay were rowing ashore in a small aluminum canoe. We swam along, beside the canoe. Grace and I laughed and splashed like dolphins. Phoenix and Jay rowed rapidly. Billows of smoke trailed behind.

After he reached the shore, Jay called me over to look at a thicket of knee-high reeds. There was nothing to see but broken beer bottles and leaches. The leaches had a stoned, bloated look, like drunks on their bar stools waiting for the next round.

"Promise you will never hit on Phoenix."

"You were ready to swap. It almost happened. We almost pulled it off."

"Hey, you almost got Phoenix, but I didn't get Grace. It is over. I never want to let go of Phoenix. Never, under any

condition. I want you to promise you'll never try to hit on her again, never, not even if I break up with her."

"What the fuck would you care what happens after you two break up?"

"So you won't have a motive to break us up."

I paced around the leach reeds, hands behind my back, deep in thought. "What about if you die? Can I hit on her if you die?"

"I'm going to lose her. And if I lose her without getting Grace, then I lose everything. I'm keeping score, Die. I can't stand for you to be one up on me. *I wouldn't rest easy.*"

"What do you want me to do? You want my promise? I'll give it to you. I promise nothing will ever happen between me and Phoenix. Not even if you die. Nothing, never. But if you did die, and she and I happened to get together, I'd find a way to bring you back to life, and I'd find a way to give her back to you..."

"Fuck you, Die."

"I swear by my code of honor. There you have it. My word."

"Phoenix has this idea about how mythic stories can change your destiny. You get plugged into part of a mythic pattern and you'll be trapped in the story. She says that's the reason history repeats itself. That's the reason you find the same stories popping up all around the world, all the time."

"Do you buy into this shit?"

"I don't know, Die. It makes a quirky kind of sense to me."

"Phoenix is getting to your head. You're thinking like her."

"Ever hear the myth of Candaules and Gyges?"

"No."

"It is story about how to cure obsessive love. Here's the way Phoenix told it to me. Candaules and Gyges were close friends.

But one day, Gyges got the hots for Candaules' wife."

"Candaules knows about how Gyges feels, no matter how much Gyges denies it. So Candaules arranges for Gyges to watch."

"Watch what?"

"You know."

"The husband guy lets his friend watch him do *'you know'* with his wife?"

"And afterward, Gyges lost interest in the wife. And Candaules and Gyges stayed friends."

"You want me to watch you and Phoenix? Because of a myth?"

"It worked that way the time you caught Karen and me together. That played with your head, didn't it?"

He looked down at the leaches. Like he was stuck in the past, where leaches were a kind of medicine. "I want you to watch Phoenix and I make love. You know the spot in the cave where we used to hide. It will give you a good view."

"That's gross. That's low, even by your standards."

"For our friendship. For the sake of your code. To set things right. Swear to me. Swear it in blood."

Jay shoved me sideways into the reeds.

"I'm sorry. It was an accident, Die."

"You fucking asshole!"

He smiled at me. A smile I've seen many times before. Every time I got ready to take a swing at Jay, he gave me a godfatherly smile. It ran in his family.

I stood up. My right leg bore a three-inch cut that seeped blood.

Jay examined the cut on my leg. It gaped at him like a smiling mouth full of blood.

Love,

Die

Letter XVIII

October 23, 1990

Dear Die,

When my efforts at library research failed, I took to the streets to find the secret of Jayne Payne, that mysterious figure whose celebrity seems based upon her nonexistence. I searched through dusty used bookstores and black market merchants. Who is Jayne Payne?

Driven by the full intention of making good on the videotapes with which I had absconded, I returned the emporium. To my surprise, a portion of the front wall had been torn away. Shattered bricks hemorrhaged their red dust all over the street. Spread-eagled magazines with broken spines lay in the gutters like road kill.

The place did not appear to be open for business, but neither did it appear closed. With nothing to block my entrance, I simply walked in.

A group of earnest plumbers, naked to the waist, attacked an interior wall with sledgehammers.

There were other men at work, these dressed in pinstripe suits. They carted away the inventory, moving with the lithe speed and synchronization of an army of repo men.

"Whom do I pay?" I asked one of the Pinstripe Suited men.

Holmes came up behind me. "No one cares. You can keep the tapes. The business is finished."

"Busted for pornography?"

"Not actually. As I understand it, they've succumbed to a

badgering campaign launched by the city and county. More like they've been whittled down by zoning and building code violations."

I set the videotapes on the counter.

Holmes grinned. "So... was it good for you, too?"

I looked down at piles of erotic cassettes waiting to be reshelved. Their covers shined with vasolined intrusions of undesirable men into beautiful women; the capitulations of women transformed into Barbi dolls through the use of peroxide and silicone. The men in pinstripe suits catalogued their illusions with military efficiency.

One of the pinstripe-suited men grabbed the cassettes I had set on the counter. Then he wheeled out through the jagged opening where the doorframe had been ripped loose.

"Did you watch Phucktom of the Opera? What did you think of it?"

"Why do you keep pimping this XXX character to me?"

"You like him. Don't deny it."

I fear I actually blushed. I don't know how he managed to penetrate my indifferent veneer.

"I can be him, if you want. Anyone can." Holmes looked around the piles of sex toys, posters, and accumulated paraphernalia. "Somewhere in this mess, there is a Mr. XXX disguise kit. It comes with masks that will appeal to your literary proclivities, if the dildos don't put you off. These masks draw from obscure Dionysian origins, predating even the watered down versions which later cropped up in Greek drama."

He began to put on the masks, one by one. "There is one with features frozen into terror by its confrontation with its own destiny. Another mask displays an utter lack of inhibition, a

relaxed expression, laced with absurdity. There is a malicious clown, a trickster ghost..."

"You really do study this ...*material*."

"I dropped out of a Ph.D. program in English to come to Law School."

By this time, the plumbers had broken through the wall. They exposed a network of pipes that had been painted pink.

He put on a mask which made him look, for all the world, like Jay Fortunata.

"So, since you study this stuff, what kind of ideas do they contain?"

"What kinds of ideas turn you on?"

From his mask kit, he produced a new face. I stared at a plasticine image of you, Die. The mask leered at me. He was taunting me, presenting you, Die, as the guardian of a Porno Hell; you, Die, sent to gloat over the fulfillment of Jay Fortunata's prediction, made long ago. I had descended into the artistic underworld.

"I was asking about the ideas... since you study this stuff... because I... I had this thought... Under the first amendment, the law can't be used to suppress ideas."

"Yeah, I know."

"So the U.S. Supreme court takes the position that pornography plays no part in the interchange of ideas..."

"I know. I know. I'm in your Con Law Class," said Holmes.

"I always thought of Pornography as a kind of Art that puts forth a proposition. That is the way James Joyce saw it, too. Don't you think it is funny, then? Don't you find it ironic?"

At this juncture, the plumbers had identified the source of a clog. They pulled shit smeared strands of videotape out of the

mouth of a disconnected pipe.

"It's the ideas lurking in your films that make them loathsome."

The men in pinstriped suits looked up from the goods which they were cataloguing.

I was saying, "They tell a kind of lie that allows them to proscribe pornography. The law has to pretend that the loathsome ideas are non-ideas."

"You have any idea what she is talking about?" asked one of the catalogers in pinstripe.

"I have no idea," replied his fellow.

I fear I was beginning to rant.

And then I caught myself and stopped.

The staring pinstripe-suited onlookers seemed relieved at my confused silence.

For a moment I recovered myself. "I wasn't talking to you. I was working on an essay. Writing it out loud."

"For Professor Weiss?"

"Actually not an essay. Actually a letter. I was writing a letter to a friend out loud."

When I realized how lamely my excuse had come across, how profoundly I projected a loss of control, I resorted to tears. "I don't know what I am doing."

Holmes said, "You know what I think about you? I think, here is a woman caught up in rhetoric. I suspect you're heartless, absolutely cold. You serve up extravagant emotional outbursts, but only when you think it makes you more persuasive. You're not experiencing your own life; you're trying to explain your life in a way that fools everyone around you."

I had been carrying on in a gross and bombastic manner,

saying things I didn't really believe because the films had so deeply affected me. I was trying to explain away my reactions. And I realized I was responding with exposition and not emotion. It was a reflex in which I had long engaged, particularly in moments of confusion and stark terror, a struggle up from the reptilian brain to the comfort of the cerebral cortex, a response I had come to law school to cultivate. I was behaving exactly in accord with Holmes's accusation, although, so was he. What was it that terrified him?

Holmes inclined his head toward the door as I struggled to pull myself together.

"I'll get you a drink. I think you need one."

"I'm an alcoholic."

"Coffee, then."

He vanished into a back room.

Does it seem odd that I should suddenly encounter another literary type? Does the timing suggest too remarkable a coincidence, the product of an unseen, heavy handed manipulator. Perhaps you question my veracity, again. But really, it is not all that unlikely an encounter. Where else, other than law school, can one turn an English degree to profitable advantage?

John returned with two steaming cups of coffee. We sat and sipped. We talked for a while.

At some point Holmes said, "When I made the switch between graduate programs, I didn't realize how close the study of lit was to law. I mean, what is the law, anyway, but a bunch of stories. Stories that have the life bled out of them. Stories reduced to their facts and their meaning. No wonder the Supreme Court can't see how ideas are hidden in a work of art. Case law exposes ideas. Explicitly."

The plumbers scaled the pink pipes with their hammers out. A momentary vibration stalled them, followed by a more urgent quake. Briefly, they hung, as if crucified, upon the trembling network of pink pipes.

Other plumbers attacked the far wall, pummeling the enormous poster which advertised Back Stabbing Fox Hunter. The arches of oversized spread legs widened until a seam opened at the point of penetration. Blinding light shined through the developing crack.

In an instant, the far wall collapsed, ripping apart the poster. The ripping of torsos and the rending of loins revealed a small movie theater hidden within the bowels of the shop. Rows of tufted seats rocked back and forth in the aftershocks. Several projectors were in use simultaneously, though the rocking seats were empty. Poles of light traversed the air, like a phantom duel. The poles of light thrust, parried, and lunged. Each vector impacted the wall, each splattered an image of a nude, until transparent nakedness blazed across the walls. Organs imposed and superimposed on one another. The area became a ghostly inferno of overlaid giant intertwining limbs, giant stroking fingers, giant vaginas filled with giant tongues, a giant mouth that could not speak.

A giant phallus of light emerged from the coalescing beams.

"Judges are used to getting stories with ideas sticking up like..."

"Cowlicks," I suggested.

At that moment he took my hand into his, making his intentions perfectly clear. He had been pacing me, echoing me, mirroring me, a common trick of hypnotists and seducers.

I found that I had an extraordinary amount in common with

him. Did we really think so much alike, or was he only saying what he thought I wanted to hear? How did he know me so well? I felt as if I were carrying on a conversation with myself.

Does it read that way? Are you suspicious? Why did this soul mate appear just as you are trying to reenter my life? It would not be the first time I invented a man to make you jealous.

But John Holmes does exist. Perhaps he exists as a product of your creation, Die. He speaks as if he'd been coached on how to appeal to me, coached by one with intimate knowledge.

Our elbows rested on the table. Onlookers might have thought we were arm wrestling. "Should opposing ideas should do battle in like form? Words against words, images against images?"

"Do you really want to talk about Law?" he asked.

I studied Holmes's hand, fingers intertwined with mine. His fingers felt cold to the touch, bringing to mind Jay's fingers, his tobacco depressed circulation. I freed myself from his chill grip. For days after watching those videotapes, I had felt afflicted by pollution of the soul, craving cigarettes, alcohol, drugs--things I haven't wanted in years. But not sex in any of its various forms, not even with myself.

I asked him, "Do you think anyone could ever do a porno film about love, fidelity, and the sanctity of marriage?" I adopted a rational tone, tried to mask myself as a crusader, but my delivery reeked of venality and guilt.

"Sounds like an oxymoron, but I don't know why."

I picked up the Die Smiling Mask. Staring into the eye holes, into the emptiness which gaped for me, I said, "This discussion is not really about Obscenity law."

"What is it about?"

"Whether or not I am going to Die."

Phoenix.

Letter XIX

October 31, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

Where were we?
Somewhere lost in memory.
Picking up pieces of broken time.

Patches of forest sprouted all over the island. I hid in a cluster of trees not far from the beach. An oasis of shade. Away from the glare. Trying to piece it out. Sitting there butt naked, getting sand up my crack. The cut on my leg still wept.

Something kissed my inner thigh. 3 times. Something wet and slimy and penetrating. The kisses hurt.

Three huge, bloated leaches dangled on my thigh like gangrenous new testicles. I pried them loose. One by one. Fell into the puddle of blood at my feet. The leaches rolled around. Still alive. Sucked and groped in the clotting pool. By accident, two of them found each other. And joined.

I scooped up the leaches. Watched them writhe. Locked in their own painful kisses. On a bloody bed in the palm of my hand. They looked like a yin and yang symbol.

While I was looking at the leaches, Phoenix cornered me. We had a moment to ourselves. Just a moment.

“Do you know the story of Candaules and Gyges?” she asked.

“Jay told me.”

“What, the version I told him, or the real story?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Candaules and Gyges was originally a true story, found in Herodotus. It was the truth, but somehow it became a myth. That’s a pattern you see throughout history. Part of the human condition transforms truths into lies and back again, an eternal cycle which permeates our heritage. Myth becomes history. History becomes myth. It nourishes the ecology of our consciousness, not entirely unlike the biological systems that turn compost into sustenance, and sustenance into compost.”

“Sounds like you’re feeding me shit, Phoenix.”

“Candaules loved his wife obsessively, and took such pride in her beauty that he wanted to show off her most intimate skills to his friend Gyges. It was all arranged for Gyges to watch, in secret. But the woman spotted Gyges, hiding like a thief. And she demanded of Gyges that he either slay Candaules on the spot and take his place forever, or be destroyed.”

“I won’t lie to you. I wish I could take Jay’s place. Without killing him, of course. But now there is no chance. It isn’t going to happen. It can’t.”

“Let me pull you down into my plot, Die.”

“You need to do something about this drinking thing of yours, Phoenix.”

Jay appeared just at that moment. Very suddenly, like he’d hitched a ride on a shaft of sunlight.

“You’re wondering how much I heard,” said Jay. “I heard... at least the part about how Phoenix should tend to her drinking problem...”

“How about getting me a drink, Jay,” said Phoenix.

The four of us sat around a dying fire. It was my birthday, June 16, 1984, but there was no birthday cake, so Phoenix offered up a dripping substitute. She handed me a S'more. With a candle on top.

Conversation slowly tapered off. Mouths bit into blackened marshmallow husks. A flood of warm, gooey sweetness followed.

The day had been long.

Grace rested her head in my lap. Her eyes closed.

Phoenix reclined against Jay, like he was her chair. Her hands fluttered up the length of his arms. Her fingers kept creeping upward, until they reached his mouth. He caught a fingertip with his lips. Sucked it in.

"How about it, Die, are we going to stay friends?"

He had one hand inside Phoenix's t-shirt. Fabric fluttered. A nipple protruded in the glow of the fading fire.

Phoenix caught me looking at her. Her eyes went cold. This was her revenge. As well as Jay's. I wondered if he had told her about his plan.

Grace began to kiss me. She blocked my view, on purpose. I kept on kissing Grace. But I looked past her. At Phoenix.

Jay's hand wandered to Phoenix's loose fitting cut-offs. Vanished behind a fringed flap of denim. I tried to force myself to look away. But I was hooked. My eyes strained for a glimpse of any part of her that came to light. I could only see Jay's fingers kneading softness. Her breathing spread out. There was a lengthening of sighs. Long breaths. Then short. Nature's Morse Code for surrender. Jay's fingers began to glisten in the orange light. It was a torment to me, but I kept looking past Grace. Past her kisses. Through the film of her hair.

Grace pushed me over, rolled me into the sand. I couldn't look anymore.

"Why are you watching?" asked Grace. "It is wrong to spy. Bad karma." She freed herself from her bikini bottom as she nestled closer.

She folded into me, blocking my view again. Straddling my thigh. She swiveled her hips back and forth, letting my leg fur brush her center. She tightened her lock on my thighs. Her ride became faster. More slippery. She was leaving shiny stripes on my leg.

The tide began to wash in around us. Wet lacy sheets.

At this point, Grace impaled herself on me. She writhed. Bucked. She was leading this dance.

She made me feel like a stag being swallowed by an anaconda. She had such tight muscle control, she would have been able to blow smoke rings with her vagina, if she weren't so opposed to cigarettes.

Grace didn't seem to mind being watched. Maybe having an audience inspired her to show off how supple and energetic she could be. She was really into sex as a kind of performance. Whatever taboo she applied to the viewer didn't seem to apply to the viewee. My moves seemed crude compared to Grace's Tantric dance. Using my pelvis for a stage. The mismatch between us was obvious. We were each caught up in our own private worlds. Less like making love and more like we were using each other's bodies to masturbate.

When I twisted around to where I could see, Phoenix and Jay stood up. Turned their backs to me. They retreated into the shadows. Gone.

Minutes passed.

A scream tore the night. A shredded human voice. So loud, and sounding so close I thought for an instant it was Grace. But it wasn't. Even though there was reason to scream. A flotilla of Portuguese Man-of-War bobbed in the water around us. Their blue and pink bubbles rode the crests of our turbulence as Grace and I shook the lacy sheets.

Then I heard the sound of Phoenix's voice. It carried on the breeze. I couldn't tell if she was crying out in pain or in passion. Her cries continued. More and more. They sounded like pain. Real pain. It sounded like pain, to me, anyway.

I started to pull away from Grace.

"Sounds like she's in trouble," I said.

"Nah."

"I'm worried."

I was thinking about how Jay had crept up on Phoenix and I in the scrub brush. Had he heard us? Did he know what Phoenix had in mind? The real story. What would Jay do if he had heard it all?

"Where do you think you are going?" she asked.

Where was I going? Nowhere, it seemed. As long as Grace had her way. But the voice of Phoenix got into my ears and into my head. Phoenix had my heart. But Grace had my body, or at least the part of it with the greatest portion of my blood supply. At that moment. I didn't know if I was going or coming.

At this point Phoenix was yelling, screaming, cursing. Long drawn out warbling cries of help... or hell. An operatic wail. A siren sound.

"What's going on?"

Grace sensed my desperation to get loose. Clamped her steel thighs around me. A hydraulic press impossible to escape.

Indifferent to the Man-of-War looming closer. Bursting on the beach. Spilling acid.

How far would I go to get free? I leveraged myself to push Grace into the blue bubbles. Just as a threat. She fought back. What power. It was like riding an earthquake on a surf board.

Phoenix, let me tell you how I tried to solve this problem. Maybe you'll want to cut this part on account you think people won't believe it, even though it is true. You might see it as me at my worst, arrogant and all. Some people might think I'm bragging. My fans won't. They expect attitude in a Die Smiling film. There was only one way I could think of to get away from Grace. Wear her out. Totally and utterly wear her out. To the point of unconsciousness. Fuck her senseless. I had done this to women before. Really. Believe me. Even though I could never do it to you, no matter how hard I tried. I wouldn't put it in our Flick if it wasn't true.

A pleasure giving contest began. The rhythm built up. Fast but gentle. Faster and faster. We went. Like marathoners straining their muscles to the limits. Hoping something wouldn't rip. I felt a vacuum trying to drain me. Like a vampire hunger, sucking. Going for the vital fluids. A wet emptiness. A quaking void. An abyss of drowning tension. The barrage on my senses was driving me to surrender. If I gave in at that moment, worked up as I was, I would have been the one to pass out.

Her well defined muscles glided under their sheath of oiled skin. She was superb. Graceful. Totally in control. But wrong for me at that moment. I don't know why. Visually flawless. As appetizing as a piece of wax fruit.

It seemed that the more distant I became, the more dissociated from the act, the more Grace intensified her assault.

Clouds of hormone perfumed the air. Silken Waves. Constricted. Grew more luxuriant.

She pushed toward the edge. It was an edge we both rode. An edge that pushed upward as it pushed in and out. And upward we went. She wouldn't give up. Pushed higher. To a height where when we fell, we would splatter.

I bit my tongue. Fought to keep from falling. The pit yawned. The Grand Canyon.

Bit my tongue. A bloody kiss. I rammed a stake into the core of her vampire hunger. Hammered it home. Again and again.

Grace cried out.

She surrendered. Over. And over. And again. And over. Turned over. Moaned. Closed her eyes. Like a wild spirit finally at peace. Laid to rest.

I was free to chase the cries of pain. A trail of discarded clothes led the way. Into the scrub brush. To a cave built of coral and rock. Pink mouthed in the moonlight. Surrounded by moss and overgrowth. Ribbed by fallen trees and exposed roots. There were many holes. Cries echoed through the opening. I went in the back way. Cries were everywhere. In the chambers. Vibrating through the air.

I looked through a small peek hole. The sea rushed in. What I saw looked like a pink squid head. Up so close it looked gigantic. Pink tentacles wrapped around a large whiteness. A wail. I smelled the sea.

Up that close. Watching. I was in the grip of crazy feelings that I hesitate to call love because you and I hadn't even kissed yet. So I think of it as hype. I am a victim of hype. Hype from Jay. Hype from my own head and hype from any other part of my

body that did my thinking for me.

Jay was right, the devious bastard. The image would stay with me. Every time you cheated on me. And even when you didn't. I would think of that night. Of Jay's skills as a lover. Your desire. Exposed.

I climbed up one of the fallen trees. Slippery as the tide rushed in around it. To the roof of the cave. Another hole up there.

Through the hole I watched. Falling into a scheme against my will. The tide crashing against the outer walls of the cave. Drops falling on me. Like rain. But not cleansing. Mud splatters blooming on my skin like asterisks. Splatters of grit and slime. Spider shaped.

Pink began to color the sky. Seep into the hole.

Then you looked directly at me. Like you knew I was there. Like you could see my eyes glittering in the hole. In the dawn. You met my gaze.

Strange as it sounds, I felt connected to you at that moment. Even though Jay was the one who had possession. I felt I had the more genuine stake in you. Jay turned into an artifact. Something in a vicarious experience.

I couldn't take it anymore. I just couldn't. I would drive the two of you apart, no matter what it took. Even if I had to throw away my only chance at the greatest love of my life. I didn't want it this way. Not by being caught in a plot. Not by being someone who once was real, but got turned into a myth.

I started pushing handfuls of mud through the hole in the roof. The mud fell in gloppy, dirty lumps on Jay and Phoenix. You two wouldn't stop. You frolicked in the filth. Other holes started to show through the roof of the cave. So many holes. The

place was turning into an observatorium.

Some Man-of-war started splashing into the cave. They fell. They washed through the holes and rained down with the sea water.

Now the screams of horror and pain were real. One of the creatures had washed over Jay, and as he pulled away, cursing, a stray, blue, stinging tentacle whipped over your face.

And at the same moment, one of them popped near me. Splattered drops of poison on my chest. I struggled to stay quiet. I grunted. Maybe loudly. Probably not loud enough to be heard over your screams and Jay's.

By then, Grace had revived, and wandered over to see what the hell was going on. The naked Grace quickly took up the task of caring for weeping and wounded. Not including me. I just got out of the way and let Grace take over. Jay would think this was my fault, somehow. And maybe it was. Revenge for the leaches.

Phoenix, I will never forget the next day. The way you looked at me when we said good-bye, both of us certain it was good-bye forever. You stared through slitted eyes. Lips pouty with swelling. Cheeks dotted by strings of pearly blisters. Like a grizzly facial cum shot.

I had blisters, too. I was burned as well. But no one paid attention to the brand on my chest, like a bubbling firebird over my heart.

“Too bad what happened to you and Jay,” said Grace. “I had a wonderful time, just wonderful. We should do this together again, and soon.”

Responding both to her and to me, Phoenix, you said, “If it doesn't happen, you two have a good rest of your lives.”

I didn't tell you about something that happened during the early stages of our script. I got a summons from a magician. He lured me out to San Francisco. Something about a proposition. Something about the most beautiful woman in the world. He goaded me with mysteries. He could easily be Jay.

A magician. And one of the best actors in the business. Iream (pronounced Ire Am) Insider wanted to use his real name in porn films, but couldn't. He is the closest male friend I have, alive. A man I dearly love.

I was willing to drop everything on Iream's account. He is a rare being. Someone who achieves an uncompromised degree of excellence. In everything. When you first fall into the sphere of his hyperkinetic energy, and you listen to him spout esoterica from on a wide variety of topics, like a Jeopardy junky showing off his stash, you start to wonder if you have met a master bullshit artist who got his material from comic books and pulp magazines. Or if not that, maybe you've met an alien. Or a slumming God. Nature's own antidote to hubris. Or any of the above, pulled off as a con job by a consummate actor.

All right. Maybe I used that kind of hype back in the days when I was setting up a woman for a swap with Jay. Don't let my lapse into fawning admiration mislead you to thinking I'm trying to set you up with Iream.

Iream claims to have been in and dropped out of many different grad schools. Dentistry. Architecture. English. Maybe even Law.

"What is your secret?" I asked him once. "How can you cram so much information into your head and pull it back when you

want it?"

"By being nobody."

"Which means...?"

"I can be anybody. I let go of my self. I try to copy the way other people think. Once, I tried to learn how to be a master fuck by thinking like Sir Richard Burton. And I found I had picked up a knack for foreign tongues."

I don't know how old he is under all that plastic surgery he's been through. Older than me. Though I wouldn't mind being in the shape he's in. He looks thin at first glance. In fact, he is solid muscle. He can double his size at will, by flexing and pumping. Like a cobra spreading its hood.

He is like one of those mad geniuses who can't hold down normal jobs, so they have to work as cesspool cleaners or private eyes or stunt cocks.

If he could get himself focused, he could do anything at all. Whatever he wanted. But then, I suppose he's doing exactly that.

I flew to San Francisco in a plane full of living skeletons. Some paled to the point of being almost translucent. You could whiff the brewing of opportunistic infections in the recycling air. The same smell floated in the fog all over the city. Fermenting spit. An army of ghosts, translucent transvestites, roamed the undulating streets.

The address Iream gave me turned out to be an old theater in the Tenderloin. A very old and very neglected theater. Ruined doors opened out into the fog.

I was greeted by Eerie Canal, Iream's beautiful assistant. She led me through a maze of backstage passages. I stepped into what I thought was going to be the dressing room.

Suddenly found myself in the spotlight. On stage. Looking

at an audience, which was looking back at me. Then they burst into applause.

Iream mounted the stage and offered very high grade dope to make up for the way he had taken me by surprise. Somehow, he had found out about our Flick. Don't ask me how. Iream is like that sometimes. He seems to be plugged into mysterious sources of information. Like he has a network of spies or something.

Iream offered to cut a deal. Right there in front of the audience. Like I would be intimidated by all the onlookers. He not only wanted to play Jay, he wanted to be Jay.

"No, no, no," I said. "You're all wrong for the part. You're nothing like Jay, aside from being my best friend."

"I can be Jay," he said in a voice that sounded disturbingly like Jay's. A voice Iream had never heard. It caught me off guard again.

"I can be anyone," said Iream. "Anyone can be me."

Iream turned to the audience. He said, "I am going to ask you to give up something that sounds like a lot, but which is really nothing. Let go of your self. Come with me. Individuality is an illusion. We are all bound together by a single force beyond our comprehension. If you are willing to let go of yourself, you can know what it is like to be me. As you watch me, you will become me. And I will become you." He began to stroke Eerie Canal, saying, "You can caress her through my fingers. Smell her perfume. I will be you. You will be me. Put yourself in my body as I put myself in her body." He pointed to a tall guy on the front row. "Will you be me?"

"Sure."

"Sure," replied Iream, in perfect echo of the man's voice. He pointed to others. Copied their voices. Like he was a vessel.

Many inside him.

"Give me your life, all of it. I can be you. You can be me. Give me your life. Your name. Your woman. Everything. Hold nothing back.

"When she makes love to me, she will be making love to all of you. We will think each other's thoughts. There is a magic in all art that makes us lose ourselves. We live in an age where the mind can create anything. Every man can be a superstar... a John Holmes, an Iream Insider, a Die Smiling... Every woman an Eerie Canal. You all have felt the magic of art in one form or another. All you have to do is believe in me. Believe, absolutely and unconditionally, and I will let you share in my body. You will see the world through my eyes. Taste the world with my tongue. Believe in me, without question, without hesitation. Your belief will be rewarded."

He kept this up for a long time, this rhythmic, hypnotic incantation.

The audience did exactly what he told them to. Unlike their usual habits, they let go of themselves. They came the way Iream led them.

Then began a sex show and magic act. Two in one. Filmed before a live audience that had to pay to get in. Iream knows how to get the most bucks for his bangs.

Fog poured onto the stage. Like fog had leaked through all the openings and rents in the battered walls. Iream arrived amid rolling screens. Stepping in and out of secret panels. Appearing and disappearing as lights from many sources hit his body. He cast strange shadows on the rolling screens. The shadows bent into a monstrous face. Then unbent into a throbbing coital cluster. Iream emerged from behind the screens. He held the

hand of Eerie Canal.

The show proceeded to a series of tricks, many involving S&M imagery. Chains. Shackles. Hand cuffs. Straightjackets. Whips. Flames. Ice. Swords. The potential for grievous bodily harm, only narrowly averted. Much skin displayed.

In one trick, he whipped harp strings into Eerie's flesh. The harp strings hoisted her into the air. Harp notes plucking as she writhed around. She hung there. Impaled. Or that's how it looked. Actually, thin hollow tubes had been wrapped around her body. The harp strings were drawn through the tubes by near invisible nylon cords.

Most of the tricks I could figure out, especially from my back stage vantage point. Iream made the usual use of smoke and mirrors, seemingly impossible contortions, holograms, wires and secret panels. But there were some tricks I couldn't figure out.

Most of the time, I would do anything for Iream. Well, almost anything. There was a girl, once. Someone he loved. He said to me, "Promise me that you won't try to steal her away."

I told him that I'd broken a similar promise to a similar friend years ago. I said, "I won't make that mistake again."

"Meaning you won't poach?"

"Meaning I won't promise."

Later that night he told me about a supermodel he was dating.

"She is the most beautiful woman in the world."

"You said that about the last one, Iream."

"The last one was very beautiful, true?"

"All of your women are very beautiful, Iream."

"But this one is really the most beautiful woman in the world. Really. You would trade anyone for this woman. Even Phoenix, I

would bet.” It all sounded very familiar. I had the greatest sense that he was trying to dig himself into my story. His motives can be strange sometimes.

I love him.

But don't trust him. Like who else we once knew?

I was almost going to turn down his bid to be Jay. Worried about setting the pattern in motion again. He imitates Jay perfectly. I feel like I'm fulfilling an old promise. Repaying an old debt. I'm bringing Jay back to life.

Since that time, I've met Iream's supermodel. I've been sworn to secrecy. That was part of the deal. I can't tell you her name. I'd tell you that she is actually the most beautiful woman in the world, but that is too much of a clue.

Love,

Die.

Letter XX

DIE SMILING— MY VOTE FOR MILLENNIUM MALE BIMBO

By Gail Pettigrew

All right, I'm going to admit it in public (Oh God, I can't believe I'm doing this): I like to watch Die Smiling films. I'll put on a wig and my crummiest clothes, sneak into the back room of the video store, rush to the counter with my goods, rent a tape and cringe when I have to show my membership card-- which has my name on it! And I say, "I'm not really Gail. I'm her ugly, stupid, evil, half-twin sister, Randy. But she let me use her card."

My editor voted for Fabio.

But I voted for Die Smiling because:

- (1) He doesn't shave his chest.
- (2) He shows what he's got.
- (3) He's got a funnier name.
- (4) He's a better form of revenge.

Not that revenge is what this is all about. It isn't, but it is a nice side benefit. Revenge for high heels, revenge for the bikini. Revenge against every male who ever drooled over gravity defying breasts on a woman wearing rabbit ears and an oversized cotton ball on her behind. And a very special revenge against Tommy Morton who sat at home on

Saturday nights dreaming of Helen Hall's 36 bust and tapered legs instead of calling me.

To all you men out there, I offer the image of Die Smiling. Six foot four. Broad shoulders and tight butted. Sleek muscles without a trace of fat. A big man. All meat and no potatoes. Do you dare to look? How many of you measure up?

Really though, more than revenge, I think my interest in Die Smiling presents a marriage of convenience. I never used to like microwave cooking-- but my present lifestyle doesn't leave time for anything else. Eventually, I developed a taste for it. Microwave cooking and microwave sex.

It is a simpler market at the video store. Less dangerous, and usually more satisfying. Let's face it-- there's slim pickings in the reality market. Men these days, what a waste. You could say that all the good ones are taken-- but that isn't really the problem. The married ones don't stay that way forever, if you know what I mean. I haven't even found any married men worth waiting for. There are no truly desirable men anywhere, anymore.

Not even Die Smiling.

It is great to watch him in action, so tireless, so skilled, so gorgeous. Pure entertainment, whether you think of it as art or a spectator sport. But to actually touch him? No way. That's not where my interest lies. I'll let him run the length of my cathode tube any day of the week-- but the only way this guy will ever enter my house is in a box.

You have to assume he's HIV positive, just from the staggering number of women he's bedded on film (and that's not counting the number in real life-- assuming he sleeps with women off camera). But that's even less a consideration than his personality; a selfish, narcissistic, pretentious, obvious woman hater. The kind of guy that probably subjects his bed partners to such insidious psychological abuse, a beating would be preferable. Here is someone you would never give the key to your apartment to-- because when you came home, the TV

would be gone. You couldn't tell him your secrets, because if they were interesting enough, he'd reveal them to the world in his next film.

And can you imagine introducing your parents to someone named Die Smiling?

Uh-Uh.

Regular readers may recall in the April issue of Femillennium, Dr. Galen Weiss harkened back to the Garden of Eden, and two gender linked punishments for eating the forbidden fruit. Man had to work by the sweat of his brow -- that was his punishment-- and woman had to carry a passion for her man -- that was her punishment. So what happens to this gender linked passion/jinx/curse now that woman has to work by the sweat of her brow, too?

So much of what I like about Die Smiling flows from the absence of old fashioned problems like worrying if romance is real or if he's going to make a commitment. In him, I have found a way to liberate myself from the power struggles and failed expectations that characterize modern male/female relationships. I have my freedom, and I did it without resort to the lesbian alternative that never much interested me. In an age where sex should only be performed by highly skilled professionals, I found this man, this microwave man. I don't have to ask him if he loves me. He don't have to ask if the sex is good. It is.

I was always told that a lady doesn't get pregnant out of wedlock. A lady doesn't get venereal disease. A lady doesn't stay out in bars. A lady doesn't pick up strange men.

How the hell does a lady enjoy herself?

She can watch Die Smiling films.

November 4, 1990

Dear Die:

The other day in a Laundromat-- a Laundromat of all places--

I found a battered magazine called Femillennium; a hip, slickly done monthly devoted to current social issues affecting women. The wrinkled cover featured an unflattering fig leafed caricature of you, promoting the lead article: "Die Smiling-- my vote for Millennium Male Bimbo."

The words of your last scene are vaguely familiar, but too much of my life has vanished into drunken black outs. I do remember trying to trap you in my tale, like a spider spinning her web. The notion still makes profound sense to me. And I remember saying something else to you that day, something you conveniently omitted. I said, "This is my story and not one of your plots. I will decide my own end, and I will not be traded or swapped or tricked. I will not be had, unless I choose to be had."

After reading your recent script, I went back to my battered copy of Herodotus. Both versions in the script contain inaccuracies attributed to me. Perhaps I told the story incorrectly on purpose. I don't remember.

I fear the breadth of the story web you and I are weaving. Expanding upon Candaules sin, we recruit our audience of lost souls to take the part of Gyges, we invite them to slay you and take your place in my bed.

It seems the past is returning to me. I've found bottles of Dulcet Lyre lying around the apartment, green lips kissed by blue lips. The air is coarse with stale cigarette smoke. Where does it come from?

A collaborator came to me as well, though I am hard pressed to describe the circumstances, for a haziness possesses me when I think back on the encounter. Had I been drinking, or dreaming? At first I was frightened when I confronted Jay's ghost. But then my uneasiness passed, and we talked of old times like old friends.

Despite everything, I have missed Jay. The love I felt for him was no less real for being of the unhappy variety, anymore than was the love I felt for you, Die, which was no happier. Sometimes I have missed Jay very much. Perhaps the souls of men are not eradicated by death; perhaps they merely hide, like data exiled into long term memory, inaccessible until summoned by the proper set of circumstances. Even now I am not sure if this exchange took place with a phantasm, or whether Jay spoke to me through John Holmes, acting as medium.

I asked the ghost if he was trying to tell us something.

He replied, "I have no message. I am just an effect."

I replied, "You can't create an effect without a message."

He smiled, that old Jay smile when he was in control. "I have a message but it has no meaning. Or if it has a meaning, you can't understand it. Or if you understand it, you destroy it."

I don't like the sequences where dead Jay possesses his old self. I took a pen to our manuscript, intending to cross them out.

"You can't write me out of the past anymore than you can write me out of the present," said Jay. "Without me, you and Die don't have a story. You have nothing. Just fucking."

And then, suddenly, I wasn't talking to a ghost anymore. I was talking to John Holmes. I stammered out a lame excuse for my bewilderment.

"Do I remind you of someone else? That's not unusual. If I remind you of someone from your past, perhaps it is because I have been forced into his role in real life."

"You are scaring the shit out of me."

"What happened to me is an old story. Old stories keep getting retold. You see it in law. There are forces that shape stories, and these are the same forces that drive the legal system.

Start with a controversy. Turn it into a story. Compare it to older stories, you know, cite the precedents. Then the present controversy will have the same ending as the older story.”

“The current of the story overwhelms the participants... I have always believed that. How did you know?”

“There’s nothing surprising here... we’re talking about a well known, well discussed phenomena. A universal constant in human experience. One that accounts for... I don’t know... strange things... mystic things. That is the way stories work their magic.”

“So what happened to you?”

"I was in love with a woman like you, once. She was an alpha female, like you, a paragon of beauty and wit. I lost her, as you can guess, to my dearest friend. Does it sounds like a familiar story? It has happened many times."

A chill crept up my spine.

I felt as if I were being led, as in a dance, toward a certain destination. Perhaps the dance was of the ballroom variety. Suddenly, a spider fell upon John’s cheek. You know what the appearance of a spider signaled in my past. This spider must have been hiding in the canopy over the bed... who knows how long. All these years.

John stood in the light, the spider creeping up his cheek. He didn’t flinch. I took it as a warning. The past was presenting itself to me again.

What happened after the spider appeared?

Did we continue anyway?

Did I finally find someone willing to indulge the melancholy that had forever taken possession of my soul?

I will let you stew over that question.

What have we said? In all the explicit scenes, you cynically

view the way the sex partners relate to one another, and their conjunctions have a kind of anti-erotic quality. That's okay, if you intend to establish a contrast between these episodes and the romance which is to follow.

In a sense, I liked the beginning sequences because they establish the preconditions for passion. The degree of love one experiences is usually inversely proportional to the loneliness that preceded it. Your first act shows a void in your life which I filled.

I am not as brazen as you. I am a little shy about baring the void you filled, but here it is:

ONE YEAR LATER

June 15, 1985.

A slender fingernail, polished silver, traces a path along a hand drawn map. The image of the silver fingernail casts a reflective glare, then transforms to the image of a polished 1984 silver Firebird.

The Firebird rumbles down a dirt road, its path on the actual landscape corresponding to the track of the fingernail on the hand drawn map. It passes tin roofed shanties.

Down the road, stallions sniff the air and circumnavigate their barbed wire confinement.

From a collapsing front porch, a fat woman stares with beady, inbred eyes, and then she spits brown tobacco juice at the Firebird. A hunter carries a double barreled shot gun through clouds of dust on the road ahead.

A burning cross flings light from the heart of the forest; its image, shining through a mesh of naked branches, cracked into

patterns like those of a stained glass window. Jay grips the steering wheel. Phoenix stirs restlessly.

Phoenix is nineteen years old again, riding in the passenger seat. A cigarette hangs from her mouth as she studies the hand drawn map which Die sent to Jay. Between her thighs, she warms an open bottle of Dulcet Lyre.

Intrigued by Die's Map and its decadent doodling along the margins, she feels connected to him, his words in her mouth like a tongue, as she reads his directions aloud: "Drive past the Fish Camp until you come to a wide dirt road. This is Main Street, though there are no signs. Keep going past the tobacco fields. Then take a right at the Witch Tree. You'll figure out how the Witch Tree got its name. Hopefully not because you're wondering which tree it is. If you get lost, do not ask the locals for directions. I do not exactly have the owner's permission to live where I am living. This mansion Grace and I have dubbed Lovehollow. If you get lost, then you're in deep shit. Find Lovehollow."

Over the past year, she had been unhappy with Jay. There had been dalliances and infidelities on both their parts. They started with preemptive infidelities, which led to retaliatory infidelities, which led to retaliatory abstinence. It was during this period of abstinence that her thoughts returned to Dieter, fantasies which provided a private escape. Despite her festering fury over his conduct the year before, she still longed for Die. In a way, she hated him for what he had done, but paradoxically, she found that her anger fueled her appetite. The blazing intensity of her hatred served as a kind of twisted proof that she was in love, really in love.

Despite her troubles with Jay, she lingered with him, and she loved him too, in a way that was distinct and different from the

way she loved Dieter. As much as she despised Grace, Phoenix had to admit that Grace had been correct about one thing. There were two distinct categories of Love.

Jay says, "I am really pissed at Die. He sends this fucked up map and warns us not to get lost. Why the hell are we doing this? Why...? After what happened last year... I still have a scar on my..."

"You know why."

"After last year... I don't know why..."

"I have it all figured out. Relax."

"I can't relax."

"Have a drink." Phoenix opens her thighs.

"Tell the truth, Jay. Aren't you cooking up some kind of swapping scheme? Isn't that the whole point of this trip?"

His silence hardens the acoustics in the space between them, until she can hear the grinding of Jay's teeth.

She says, "I know you'd never tell me if you were planning a swap. That would ruin the game for you."

"You put me up to it. You forced it."

"You have no idea what kind of swapping game would catch my fancy. My kind of swapping game is nothing like what you boys have planned."

"So what do you want?"

"I might be interested if we did it on my terms. Something totally different, more like something extraordinarily disorienting, something thrilling and frightening..."

"Like one of your horror stories. No thanks..."

"How about if we gave Die the scare of his life, to pay him back for what he did to us last summer. We'll make Die think that he killed you. I'll show up alone and tell him you died of

complications from the man-of-wars stings. Then you masquerade as a ghost.”

“This is bullshit.”

“No, it’ll work if you let me do it my way. Let me script out the whole thing. Do what I dictate, and mouth my lines. Then, when Die is terrified out of his wits, when he’s thoroughly shattered, when he’s destroyed... that’s when we’ll do it. Will you let me? I really want to do it... but my way...”

Her face seeks the shadows of his neck. With the tip of her tongue, she traces the sheath of his jugular.

"Stop it."

"Why are you so uptight?"

“I was thinking about you and Die. But now I am thinking about getting killed. Die dragged us all the way out into the emptiest slice of nowhere this side west of Bumfuck, Egypt. This is the kind of place where we will get shot just for being rich and young and together.”

She unbuttons his shirt, and continues her moist exploration.

"There's a gun in the glove compartment. I suggest you pull it out."

Phoenix unzips his fly.

Suspicion nags at me. Something beyond co-authorship motivates your involvement in this enterprise. I haven't gotten to the bottom of this yet. Too many inexplicable coincidences simultaneously assault me. My paranoia implicates Holmes into your scheme as well. It is not beyond the powers of my imagination to cast my only companion as your coconspirator.

What is up with you, Die, other than the usual?

What bribes must I offer to learn the secret of Jayne Payne?

Yours,

Phoenix

Letter XXI

November 9, 1990

Dear Phoenix,

Something happened to me. Took me by surprise. I'm getting jealous of this Holmes guy. Me, who can calmly watch his chick of the moment make it with other guys. I thought I was over being jealous of you, but I'm not. Maybe I brought this on myself.

This Holmes guy gets in your head the way Jay used to. He gives off the same aura of threat. Maybe because you plugged him into your tale and gave him a role?

It shouldn't be surprising to find pieces of Jay cropping up. Viral like. Thrusting himself into our business.

Jay was always quite the control freak.

Phoenix, I can't tell you exactly what's going on. I'm not even sure myself. Be careful, Phoenix. I'm not just saying this because I'm jealous. Watch yourself around this Holmes guy.

Love,

Die.

Letter XXII

November 12, 1990

Dear Die:

I have been overcome with fear lately. My upcoming confrontation with Galen Weiss fills me with trepidation. But I haven't altered my plans.

Why do I continue? By picking this fight, perhaps I will learn something and transform myself, or transform others. Or have I picked this fight because it is a fight I hope to lose?

Can it be that I am using the powerful rhetorical weapons now at my disposal to rationalize away the truth? What is the truth? Is it like obscenity? Do we know it when we see it?

Right now, I'm lying on the antique four poster we found in Lovehollow, an island of timelessness on which we lost ourselves so many nights and mornings and afternoons. The canopy still bears a mahogany chip, the scar left by the champagne cork you so recklessly aimed on the eve of 1986.

Knowing your obsessive drive to portray only that which is true, I have tried to reach back in my mind, to plumb the recesses of my memories. Since we have been apart, I have longed to return to the past, to relive it, to correct my old mistakes. Especially one.

I find little fragments of moments, scattered in the darkness between synapses. The more I reach into the darkness, the more the darkness seems as important as the little fragments. In this bed, this museum piece of our past, I feel the accretion of past and future incidents with equal measure, the sequence being irrelevant

in the darkness. Fragments of past and future gather into the intervening darkness until the aggregation culminates in my death.

I am reaching into a void where time does not exist, to retrieve old moments. I inhabit these old moments to find the truth for you, but while I am there, in the past, temptations overwhelm me, and I wonder if it is possible for me to connect deeply enough to change history, to find a blank space where the slate can be wiped clean. Do I have this power within me? Am I a goddess, as Jay used to claim.

Jay sits in the car, his fly hanging open, his face reddening in the light of the setting sun.

"This is not the right time for this kind of thing. Not now. Not here. I can't believe you, Phoenix. For the last two months, you haven't put out at all. You've kept me wondering what I am supposed to do about us. Should I move out? Have an affair? Propose? What do you want from me?"

"You swapped me, didn't you? You obsessed over countless doubts, and so you sold me out for Grace."

"I admit, I tried..."

"You tried? Without telling me?"

"You wanted it."

"How do you know what I want when I don't know myself?"

"You kept telling me in every way, except directly. That is the only way you know to tell the truth."

"Fuck you," She says.

"Yeah, well fuck you, too."

"All right."

"All right, what?"

"Fuck me."

"I thought you wanted to roll the Die."

"Please, put aside questions about the focus of my desires, for the moment, and appreciate simply the immensity of those desires."

"You don't deny it?"

"Perhaps I was being too oblique. I wish very much to be fucked. Right now. I am not saying by whom I wish to be fucked - but I don't see anyone else around. Do you want to take advantage of the situation? Or do you want to interrogate me further?"

Jay slowly squeezes the brakes, and the Firebird glides to rest by the side of the road. She slithers out of her shirt.

Reaching behind her, she clicks on the radio.

"You'll run down the battery," he says.

"I want music."

With a deft, unified motion, Phoenix disengages his golden belt buckle. Jay tries to squirm away from her hands, his pants crawling down his hips. As she works the garments, his desire curves toward her. Free from its constraints, it leaps like a silvery fish, gills spread.

"What has gotten into you?"

"The country air."

But it wasn't. It wasn't the liquor either. It wasn't even her own sexual hunger which had been building during two months of abstinence.

He kisses her brutally, an insensitive thrusting and sloshing of tongue; a pugilistic kissing style, entirely unlike the slow, graceful

kisses he usually delivered. It feels as if he is trying to flex a muscle into her mouth. Not that these kisses are entirely unpleasant; they are strong and wet, and unfamiliar, driven by a competitive edge.

Phoenix knows of a better place to receive such kisses.

With fingers locked in his hair, she steers his head down slopes of flesh. He tarries in places worthy of attention along the way. She permits these dalliances. But when his head reaches its destination, guided by her gentle urging, he stops.

He stared, a bewildered expression on his face.

She feels his eyes upon her, there. And she feels his touch, his fingers gently parting lips. His eyes penetrate, probe. Lubricating to admit his sight, Phoenix stares back with a Cyclopean gaze, a single dilating pupil. The intersection of their vision completes new circuits of emotional flow.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she asks.

"I wonder who it wants."

"If you wish it to speak to you, give it a tongue."

He does. He spreads out his tongue like a velvet cloak, a swirl of taste buds. His anger has not abated; the heat of his fury palpable as he sucks a bud of flesh into a cage rimmed by teeth, delicate nerves shuddering in terror and ecstasy, a small beast in the maw of a carnivore.

He slithers his tongue deeper, writhing, tasting, burrowing.

(The memory of Jay's touch took me. His cold touch. I was there, in his arms, pivoting.)

At the side of the dirt road, Phoenix tries to change Jay by using her body, as if she could rub romance through his skin and into the network of his nerves. And even if she did not change him, at least she would not betray her loneliness and longing to

Dieter Smith.

(Die, to the extent that you must explicitly depict genitals, I request you try to be aesthetic in your depiction-- using hazes, or beautifully composed semi-abstract close-ups, like Georgia O'Keefe paintings.)

Jay asks, "Who do you want?"

"Why should it matter? You get to fuck me."

"Who do you *really* want? If you had a choice...?"

"I *do* have a choice. I won't be swapped against my will. I decide whom I get and who gets me."

"Who do you want?"

"The truth?"

The windows of the car, chilled by the air conditioning, begin to fog. The forms of Phoenix and Jay blur from the outside. Tiny beads of moisture cling to the cold glass-- their commingled, accumulating breath.

The beads of moisture balloon into globes. Each magnified watery orb carries its own warped vision of bared flesh. Abstracted forms of he and she flow into one another, changing shape as they move; like one celled protoplasmic organisms conjugating on a microscopic field, or like peach colored blobs of mercury pulling together and breaking apart.

The globes of water grow heavier as the breathing inside accelerates. The globes turn to droplets and drizzle away, revealing the couple. They are running out of air within that confined space. Jay reaches for the door handle, but Phoenix claws his hand. He gasps, but Phoenix will not relent. The air inside was growing thin and hot and wet. Jay's skin turns dusky as he labors to breathe. Phoenix rocks her hips harder and faster.

(I was back there, in the car, no longer in reverie. I was

suffocating.)

"You don't need air," said Jay. "We smokers...our bodies are used to deprivation. They thrive on it." He was dragging her into the airless sea that was his domain.

But no. That's not what he said. He said, "We corpses don't need air."

"Phoenix..."

"Are you willing to die for me?"

He is trying to erase all the past wrongs, to find a new beginning: to impose his essence on her, until she is what he is, until they reach a union of zeroes, a transmutation into sameness.

In their passion, they have all but exhausted the available air. They thrive dizzily on each other's exhalations. They are both thinking about being dead together, a horrifying contrast to sweat and wetness, the pounding of heart against heart, the cross reflections of dilating pupils. Death and sex have always cohabited in human consciousness. To die is Elizabethan slang for orgasm.

That moment would have been a perfect consummation for the marriage of Phoenix and Jay. She lost track of where she was and when she was. It was a perfect vacuum of a moment, unable to breathe and indifferent to the consequences. Suffocation intensified the consequences of her suspended entanglement. She almost fell in love with Jay again, contemplating a marriage bed of death, dying in his arms, at once his widow and his bride. It was almost as if she had sensed his tragic destiny, and found herself lured toward it.

In the midst of her death fantasy, she felt the warm flow of mucus into mucus. She surrendered when he surrendered in the airless interior.

At that moment, the car door opened, and my lungs filled

with air, simultaneously a climax and rebirth, a merger of the past and future, a fulfillment of my name.

I came to consciousness to find John Holmes lying on top of me, his cold hands upon my breasts, his lips pressed to mine, but not in a kiss. He said he was attempting resuscitation, if you can believe that. The Firebird's exhaust malfunctioned, and fumes had caused me to pass out. It was an old car, Jay's old car, in fact, which he had bequeathed to me. I fell out of the past, onto the pavement of the parking lot in my apartment complex.

John Holmes fell on top of me, occupying almost the same position as Jay when we fell out into the twilight, our rib cages heaving.

"Do you know what will happen if you leave me for Die? It will be the end of me, I swear. It will kill me, Phoenix. And what will it mean for you? I can tell exactly what will happen. If you cheat on him, even once, he will never forgive you for it. He'll hold it over your head forever. He will say he wants one outside fling, something just to even up the score, but after that, he will cheat on you all the time. He won't hide it, because he's got this thing, this code thing about always telling the truth. But the two of you will be stuck in an endless cycle of revenge fucking, and..."

"You know what I want," she said to Jay, as he lay heavy and sweat soaked on top of me, his seed leaking out of her, just up the road from Lovehollow.

"Not again."

But that wasn't what she had wanted. If she had said more, she would have been the one proposing, and that wasn't acceptable. So instead, she said this: "I want to take part in your swapping game, but my way. You play dead. We'll make Die think that you're a ghost."

“He would never fall for it..”

“He will, if you let me do it my way. In a manner absurd but elegant, and horrible too, bone chilling, goose flesh prickling, something uniquely ours, to carve a message on the granite of reality, to preserve you, Jay, long after you are gone. I know what I am saying seems meaningless and impossible now, but my words will gather their effect in the distant future, long after you are dead. My fantasy will work a kind of resurrection for you, and total destruction for Die. And here’s the way we’ll do our swap. You’ll be a ghost, a dead spirit that will take possession of Die. Wrapped in his flesh, you will take me... and...”

“Have you gone completely insane?”

John Holmes hoisted me up in his arms with an ease I would not have expected. He carried me back to my apartment. His fingers felt cold against my skin, eerily like Jay's touch. I felt as if I were being carried by some moment out of time.

John Holmes said that he had become concerned about me after I failed to show up at school for the past few days. He had broken into my apartment and found your letters were lying around, along with an uncountable number of empty green liquor bottles.

By the time he found me, I was slumped over the wheel of the car, the engine was running, the pages of our Flick blowing around the interior.

Letter XXIII

November 15, 1990

Dear Phoenix:

I didn't know who else to talk to about my feelings, so I went looking around the sets for Eerie Canal.

I found her in the middle of a shoot. Right away, all she wanted to talk about was getting the part of Grace. She launched a lobbying effort that went all the way from the Lobby to the Penthouse. She wouldn't shut up about it. Even while she was getting poked. And even while she was being filmed while getting poked.

I said, "Can't you wait until we have a minute alone?"

"What is the matter, Die? Afraid to have your private business aired on video tape?" She spoke with a slight Teutonic accent that might be fake. Her voice buzzed from the depth of her throat. A purring full of slurred sibilants.

A tattooed logo gleamed on the insides of Eerie's thigh. A series of wavy lines that could be a river or some other kind of cleft. It is her trademark in the proprietary sense, actually registered, so that no one can print her picture without paying royalties.

Many producers have been fooled by Eerie's wide eyed mysticism, only to find themselves suckered and outflanked. Eerie has a good head for figures. As well as other things. The New Age foibles aren't a sham. They're just another aspect of her life parlayed to the interests of free enterprise.

Some people take your money with lies. Others with the

truth.

Descended from the hooker priestesses of Baal, she knows that every religion has to come to grips with realities of the market. She sells her old underwear to her fans at a premium. Changes panties every three hours to keep up with the demand. You can call a pay-per-minute number any time of day and talk to Eerie herself, not a tape or some voice-clonette, like you get from other starlets. The line offers a combination telephone sex and psychic counseling service. It costs double what the competitors charge. According to Eerie, there's nothing wrong with exploitation. Just so long as it's consensual. As long as it is mutual.

After countless hours of shimmering on the phone lines, spouting theories of love that cost three dollars just for the preamble, Eerie latched onto the notion that America accepts the gospel of pleasure through acquisition-- what Curtis Ensor used to call "getting off on getting." Curtis used to laugh when I talked about Art. It was just a kind of product to him. And sometimes I feel like I'm just a product too, but I'll tell you what I think I'm the product of.

If you stay in the porno business long enough, you see the bottom line effects of teaching people to enjoy flashy, passing entertainments. Your view slants to the notion that the national taste cultivates taste toward the transient. The disposable. Greed is a symptom of mental health. Isolation is the key to self preservation. You would think these attitudes would cause cultural premature ejaculation, but I think they keep the economy erect.

Eerie formed a corporation to manage her holdings. Incorporated her ass, as she puts it. You can buy shares through Men's magazines. Eerie spreads over on a full page add, showing

off her logo. "Lay the Canal," it says.

Given Eerie's preoccupation with health, mysticism, and all things financial, she would be a natural for the part of Grace. Rattling off incomprehensible jargon about reincarnation, astrology, and acupuncture, she convinced me she could play the part in her sleep. Probably better than she could awake.

Up to this moment, Scarlett Fever had been the leading contender for the part. Scarlett has the legs and the face and the paneled abs it takes to play Grace. Even a pink aura, according to people who see such things. But Scarlett Fever has the wrong kind of glands.

I told Eerie I would consider her for the part of Grace if she would talk to me about your John Holmes, and Iream Insider, and whether I'm making a terrible mistake by invoking the memory of Jay Fortunata.

I let Eerie read your last letter, Phoenix. I hope you don't mind. Asked her if she could find some meaning under the madness.

"It happens all the time," said Eerie. "People who open themselves up to the experience will find it."

"What experience?"

"The supernatural." Only she pronounced it "zhe zoopernatural."

"Aw, come on."

"You understand. You are the artist. Magic shifts consciousness. Art too, so to say. We do things to reality. When you watch the act, the very act of making life, it changes brain chemistry. Raises magical powers. It is the most direct way. After all, we are talking about the primal thing of human inspiration."

"Porno??"

“People outlaw Porno for this reason. Think what is porno. Pictures of skill, conquest. Pictures to show fate, chance, instinct, conquest, surrender, sacred and profane, everything all at once. It is black magic. A copy replaces the thing itself. You do not believe me, do you? You do not believe in ghosts or the hereafter. Not God or the Devil, or magic of the soul.”

"None of it."

"What a bleak world you live in. I think it is true what they say in the tabloids. Someone broke your heart."

"There's not a fucking thing wrong with my heart. It will last me the rest of my life."

“Listen very carefully to me. It is possible to open up new human potentials. Telepathy. Telekinesis. Clairvoyance. Think of it as art, Darling. Erotic art drives people inside themselves. They bring back tokens. These tokens change the world.”

I don't remember what I said at this point. It was something intended to make it sound like I understood what she was talking about. In fact, I hadn't a clue. A kind of surreal semantic tango ensued. I had done this tango before. Usually in the context of trying to get laid. But also when I used to talk to my stroked out grandfather. I used to just go with the flow. When I didn't want to let the old man catch himself babbling.

I told her, “I once had a dream about running through a field of butterflies. It was so real, I could actually feel them fluttering against my face. I reached out. Grabbed a butterfly. Woke up suddenly. And there was still something in my hand. Fluttering.”

"That is what I mean."

"But it was a cockroach.”

She thought for a moment, trying to fit this new factor into her world view. Then she brightened. "Only because you let it be

a cockroach, Darling."

What ever thread of logic I thought I had been following had frayed to incomprehensibility. Every time it seemed our conversation was getting in sync, she would launch it back into the ozone. She wasn't using words like language. More like she made sounds to try to connect on a deeper level. She might as well have been talking in tongues. I kept nodding as if I understood.

"A ghost entered this world through your story. The ghost maybe found someone who maybe suffers from a psychic weakness. He could be the perfect medium for this Jay of yours."

"So this person we're talking about, he shouldn't be put in this position? Especially not with Phoenix?"

"You understand what I mean. Iream suffers from the same weakness of psyche since someone we know took his girl."

A ringing started in my ears. I felt threatened. By what, I don't know. Like a kid afraid of a clown mask. In the dark.

"You don't think this is about someone playing with my head? You think it is a real ghost, then."

"Ghosts take many forms. We absorb people we come into contact with. We eat them and they live inside us. You are who you eat."

"You must be a lot of people, Eerie."

"We all are a lot of people. Are you trying to change your past, Die? Rewrite your own history. Repay a debt? Fix an old mistake? Balance an account? You summoned something from the past."

"So what would you do, to get rid of this *something*?"

"Change your plans. Leave Phoenix out of this. Let the past be gone."

"That would ruin everything."

"Why? What are you planning?"

I had to think. "It feels wrong. Phoenix has to be involved. Otherwise, it won't play out the right way. It would be a cop out. Like simulation onscreen, instead of real fucking."

"You're not being honest."

"What about you?"

"Let me explain it like this. I will give you a scientific explanation. You think you are a single person, alone, and the rest of the universe is made up of parts as alone and separated as you. But everything in the universe is part of everything else. It is all the same. Every part contains the whole. The whole contains all the parts."

"The hole is everything. I've heard this rap before. Jay Fortunata and I used to use it to talk chicks into swapping partners."

"It is a truth I live. You find the right pressure points, you rub the Universe in the right way, and you can make it do... anything!"

"You and I have very different ideas about the meaning of the term 'scientific explanation.'"

"You were the one who sought me out."

I said, "You don't think someone is playing games?"

"You were the one playing games, Darling. But the game turned on you. Let me prove to you magic is real."

I raised an eyebrow. "Show me." This kind of banter usually means that casting will take place under the sheets, and the screen test will be rehearsed. But we were just clowning around.

"This summer, when you were watching Iream and me, did you let yourself go? Did you get inside his body, and get inside of mine?"

"It was too hokey for me."

"But isn't that what all art is supposed to do, and porno more than anything else?"

"What?"

"Put you inside the work."

I laughed.

"Give it a chance, Die. Let me fuck your brains out on the astral plane." She closed her eyes, like she was going into a trance.

Time went by.

"You got to open yourself to the experience, Die."

"This is about as open as I get."

"You are not going to take my very good advice, are you?"

"It is my story. My life."

"Then let me be a part of it. Let me into your past, Die. Let me into your future. I have the power to protect you from what ever lurks there, what ever it is that frightens you. I will be your saving Grace." She harkened back to the party line, "We enter an age the mind can create anything, Die."

I asked, "Every woman an Eerie Canal?"

"Every man a Die Smiling." She winked. "Everyone will be able to do anything by looking into themselves and rubbing the universe where it wants to be rubbed. Anything at all is possible. Even changing the past. Everyone of us can be a god."

"I believe that. Everyone can be a god. But only in their heads. So what does that give us? Everyone off somewhere enjoying their own hallucinations. Everyone lost in a fantasy. A private reality. Everyone in touch with nothing but themselves. Everyone grabbing cockroaches and thinking they're butterflies."

She wasn't listening anymore, blotting out what she didn't want to hear. She just stood there, breathing. There was nothing

for me to do but study her.

When she was done with her breathy trance, she looked up at me and asked, "So was it good for you too?"

"You made me feel hypnotized, but it was more like being hypnotized to believe that nothing happened."

"You will never know what you missed." She winked, cunningly. She had aimed for, and hit, my deepest fear.

Love,

Die

Letter XXIV

November 17, 1990

Dear Die:

John Holmes read your letters. He said, "I felt I had to read them. I hope you will forgive me. I couldn't find you anywhere. I was looking for a clue..."

"These letters are very personal."

"I'm sorry."

"Did you like them?"

"I read the letters because I was worried about you being in some kind of trouble. Now I'm worried for a different reason, I guess, you could say I'm worried about a different kind of danger. Can I be frank? About the letters, even though I had no business reading them. I think you should lay off this script for awhile."

"I can't. There are too many questions unanswered, too many conflicts unresolved in my past."

"This past is trying to reinsert itself into your present."

"Jealous?"

"I want to help you."

"You think I'm going crazy. If that's what you think, you could be right."

"Your old boyfriend makes you crazy."

"That's the way he likes me best."

"He's trying to get back at you."

"Die knows better than to try to revenge himself on me. He and I have been through multiple cycles of retribution, and it has ceased to be gratifying."

John suggested a theory to me, a hidden agenda on your part, Die. He thinks you are trying to pull me through the screen, into your world. Do you aspire to recruit me to be your co-star in this movie, as well as co-author? Would you try to resurrect the old Phoenix, for the old Phoenix might have been capable of such daring? Would you stir her ashes?

Is that what you are up to?

Phoenix

Letter XXV

November 19, 1990

Dear Phoenix,

I'm sorry I didn't answer your last letter before now. I know it took me too long to write. Other things have taken me too long, too. It's been hard. I've been busy getting behind in my affairs.

Holmes says he wants to help you. In Holmes' way of talking, help is one of the many words in the English language that mean fuck.

I don't need you to play yourself. Holmes got it wrong. I have an actress to play you. I've had her for awhile.

I drove down to Brewick this past summer, the town where Jay and I grew up. The little town. Well, not so little these days.

I walked along the old streets. Just wandering for hours. No idea why I went there. Hadn't been home for a long time. All my old friends moved away. Or died. Didn't expect to run into anybody I knew.

But I did.

Of all people in the world, I ran into Iream Insider. Maybe he followed me there. Maybe. Couldn't coax a confession out of him. Instead he offered this excuse. Said he came to see where Jay had lived. Where Jay was buried.

I kept on walking around. Iream joined me. On into the night. Iream seemed to know his way around. It never takes him long to get the lay of the land.

We ate at the old Drug Store Diner where you could place off track bets. The place where Jay used to get drunk on the water. It

was still intoxicating.

We visited all the old spots. The park where Jay and I used to smoke dope. The fields where we brought chicks at night and swapped them. The cow pastures that grew psilocybin mushrooms after a heavy rain. The used book store near the circle that had dirty mags in back.

Iream said, "I came to this town thinking I could do a better job of playing Jay if I got closer to him. I wasn't expecting this, though, I wasn't expecting him to be all around me, like this, part of everything, everywhere."

I could feel what he was talking about. It felt like Jay was there. You would have felt it, too.

"Why are you doing this, Iream? What is Jay to you, anyway? I get the feeling you are going after more than just an acting part. Like it is much more important than any other role in the hay."

"Maybe it is Phoenix. Have I fallen in love with her because loving Phoenix is part of being Jay? Or am I trying to emulate the other great love in her life?"

"What about your supermodel?"

"She has fallen in love with someone else. I can tell, though she won't admit it. I think it is no smaller a competitor than Huge Beaumont. She's always had a thing about size. I think it really is Huge Beaumont. I hope it is. I mean, if she has to be cheating on me, I would rather it be with someone I like. I don't really mind if she's happy with one of my friends."

"I never really saw her as the Huge Beaumont type."

"You're wrong."

"No. I'm not. I'd be willing to bet she's not fucking Huge Beaumont."

"How would you know?"

"She's fucking *me!*"

He just nodded. I got the feeling he really didn't know, even though we had talked about how it might happen. He didn't suspect. I was too close for him to see it. But maybe he tricked me into confessing just then. Anyway, I had to tell him some time or another.

He said, "I knew this was going to happen. I knew it all along, but still it takes me by surprise. All of a sudden, I don't want to be Jay anymore. How about trading roles? How about in the movie, I play you and you play Jay?"

"I'll make it up to you," I said. "Someday."

It is funny. At first, I distrusted Iream for trying to insert himself into our flick. I knew he was fixated on you. Has been for awhile. For as long as I've known him. And I thought maybe he was trying to get at you through this project. Moving in. Trying to connect.

But instead of penetrating our flick and filling it with his own material, instead of changing it to be his own, Iream kind of got sucked into the story. It repeated itself on him.

So where were we?

Near sunset. Phoenix was lying naked in the grass, drinking, and drunk, while Jay pulled up his pants. She looked up. Suddenly startled. The tree has a face. Knot holes like puffy eyes looked at her. A low branch jutted out like the nose of a hag. Brittle branches spread like a mass of electrified hair.

The couple climbed back into the car.

Jay switched on the headlights.

The eyes of the Witch Tree flared.

The beams splintered and swept through the woods. As the car traveled, rows of trees sucked into the vortex of the horizon. Suddenly they reached a clearing. The woods seemed to fling open like big doors.

The Firebird slid past old rusty chains hung on a broken fence. The car crept down an iron driveway overgrown with weeds. Michelin tires scattered pebbles. Broken statues littered the path. Grasping marble hands, severed faces, and other protruding body parts from mock Grecian statues posed like the last gestures of quicksand victims.

I stood at the end of the driveway. Wore a felt hat and a double breasted coat from the 1940's. My pants didn't match the coat. Tight denim. No shirt under the coat.

I stood on the front porch of Lovehollow. Like I was posing for a liquor ad.

At first glance, in the indirect lighting, Lovehollow seemed magnificent. A three story antebellum mansion. But as you got closer, you could make out termite trails on the Grecian columns in front. Loose boards popped up along the veranda. Tattered paint drooped on the walls.

A dead peacock sprawled on the weedy lawn. A warm breeze stripped feathers from the rotting corpse. Dark rainbows tossed to the night.

Phoenix made her entrance. A great show. Long pale legs disentangled their way out of the car. The Firebird's leather upholstery made a sloppy kissing noise as it broke contact with her skin. A silver vein along her thigh flashed in the moonlight; it looked like a slug's trail. Sweat has left her hair stringy.

She walked straight. Well, not so straight. She walked kind

of sore-middled and Dulcet Lyre wobbly. Toward me. She got within striking distance. She put her hand on my shoulder.

"Is it real?" she asked.

I kissed her still flushed cheek. She jerked away.

"Just being friendly," I said. On the defensive.

"Just checking out the coat, to see if it is camel hair."

"Oh, it is real all right. Vintage World War Two. Something that used to belong to Nazis." I opened the coat. Showed off a label written in German on what the moths had left of the silk lining.

"Gorgeous."

Jay snuck up. Suddenly he was at my side. He pulled me into a brotherly embrace. I had rarely seen him so mellow. Phoenix stuck herself between me and Jay.

She said, "I hate to break this up, guys, but I desperately need a john."

"Use the bushes," I said.

"Come on."

"There's no running water or electricity in the house."

She stalked off into the shadows. Jay's eyes followed her. I took that as permission for my eyes to do the same.

"So where is Grace?" asked Jay.

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Gone for good."

He frowned, suddenly thrust into a deep funk. "Too bad."

"Disappointed?"

"Too bad for you."

"Falling from Grace hasn't been terrible. I swim ten miles in the river every day, and eat nothing but fresh fish and garden

grown vegetables. This is the first conversation I've had with another human being in the last three months, and I really haven't missed it because my relationship with Grace had reached the point where she couldn't talk without complaining. Every now and then, to break the monotony, she might throw in a complaint that wasn't about me."

"Couldn't keep her satisfied?" He was flustered by these new developments. No utilities and a rogue male.

"She bitched about how useless I had become. She asked me: 'what happened to the capable man I fell in love with?' I told her: 'fucking eight times a day.'"

"I was going to call off the swap plan, anyway."

"I thought you and Phoenix were on the brink of breaking up."

"That's also what I thought. Now I don't know. Something happened on the way here that changed everything. I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"Sounds like an extreme measure, over a single event."

"Yeah, well..."

"She must have given you one hell of a fuck."

"It wasn't fucking..."

"A hell of a blow job, then."

"It is none of your business what happened between her and me. It doesn't matter if it was a blow job, or a kiss, or making love..."

"Okay, okay."

"It was something private and beautiful."

"Private? Does that mean I can't watch anymore?"

"Everything has changed."

I lost my cool. "Didn't you come out here to complete our

swap? I'm sorry that I seem to shy of one woman at the moment. She took off. Anyway, I'm in love with Phoenix."

"Die, probably better than anyone else on the planet, you know my attitude toward chicks. I treat chicks like consumables... replace them when they wear out or turn boring or demanding. And when I'm done with them, I pitch them, like slimy tissues. And that's how I feel about all of them."

"Don't I know what a fucking die hard romantic you are."

"I am a romantic, at heart. I want too much from love. I never had it before. But I have it now. Phoenix revived me. She caused a revelation. For the first time I feel I have dipped into the primal well of immortality, the fiery fountain of forever..."

Off in the distance, Phoenix dropped her shorts. Opened her loins in a squat. Revealed a fountain of unmatched artistry. A stream that looked like glittery sparks wet the grass. Even from that distance, I could smell kidnifed Dulcet Lyre.

Jay said, "I will not swap a value I calculate as infinite for what's in your empty hand."

"Maybe Grace will come back."

Phoenix returned from the bushes.

Jay said, "Get in the car, Phoenix. We're leaving."

She went paler than usual. But she held herself together.

"Are you boys fighting again? We just got here."

"Grace is gone."

"I never liked her anyway."

"Phoenix, get in the fucking car!"

She yelled, "I am not your property, Jay Fortunata. Don't order me around."

Jay grabbed Phoenix by the arm. She fell as he tried to drag her to the car. While he fumbled for the car keys, she kicked. She

screamed.

"Leave her alone, Jay," I said.

"Keep out of this."

I said, "This time I'm not giving in to you."

He ignored me. Grabbed Phoenix. Pulled her into the car with him.

The engine started. I jumped onto the hood. Seemed to be the protagonistic thing to do. Jay launched into a tirade. I couldn't hear him yelling from my side of the windshield. I could read his lips, though. Many variations of the word "fuck," used as multiple parts of speech. On my knees, the most I could threaten him with is a dented hood or scratched paint. I tried to stand. The Firebird ripped into reverse. Flung me to the ground.

Jay shot backward up the path. He mauled the lawn. Rubber spun. Chunks of grass, clods of earth sprayed over me.

Just before the Firebird's rear could ease past the gate, a loud shot rang out. Sharp and clear. Punctuated by echoes. A crystal web formed instantly on the passenger window. It hung there for a moment. Then the window collapsed. Another shot rang out. This one made a small crown shape pop up on the roof. You could stick your finger through it. The car stopped dead.

I limped over. Rubbed my sore shoulder. Phoenix climbed out from the passenger side. A gun smoldered in her grip.

Jay followed after her. His hands trembled. His eyes became suddenly bloodshot. "Look what you did to my car!"

"You can leave if you want. I'm going to spend at least one night in the haunted house."

"Tell her to leave, Die."

"He doesn't get to order me around either."

I said, "She's got the gun."

There is a species of party most aptly described as private parties. Privates party. Sort of spawning rituals of the lust-object elite. Certain rules apply. Fame isn't enough to gain access. You have to be notorious. Some are invited to be performers. Others are invited to be performer's props. Many criminals attend, a class by themselves. Participants up their status through by showing off their wastes. Waste of cash or other assets, or waste of self. But the object of waste must be a renewable resource. Waste of a non-renewable resource lowers status at the same rate as the resource.

It was at a party like that where Iream met his supermodel. She needs a name, so we'll call her Swan. For now. The tabloids make me paranoid. We have to use a coded reference to her real name. But you probably wouldn't recognize her real name. You might know her professional name. If you didn't, you would know her face.

Her legs have sold panty hose. Her neck has sold emeralds. Her ass has sold bikinis. Her breasts have sold jogging bras. But it is her face that has been on everywhere and its backside. That face. Photographed and printed so many times it has become an icon of class. Even when hawking douches.

Last fiscal year she franchised out her face for three million. Actually down a full thirty percent from the year before. Her cheekbones are too perfect. Only narrowly surviving a string of abusive relationships where they've been a frequent target. Her ectomorphic hair can change at will to smoke, ocean, mane, brambles, or moonbeams. A redhead in the past. She can be a redhead again.

I'm writing this letter with her intimate scents smeared all

over my face. Like the most expensive perfume in the world. I ache to tell you her name. It would hit you square in the area that enjoys saying no when I ask you to come back to me. But I can't. These parties have taboos. The heaviest relate to keeping secrets.

Love,

Die

Letter XXVI

November 27, 1990

Dear Die:

Die, I'm going to let you in on a secret. Before you left me in the hospital in Hightstown, that night I tried to die and you saved me, I had confessed to betraying you, a single episode of infidelity. Over the past years, I have entertained the notion that you would not have left me if you but known the circumstances of that episode. You see, I did not tell you the entire story, nor did I tell anyone else, and I thought no one would ever know the truth but Jay and me.

Die, would it have mattered if I cheated on you many times, for many different reasons? If I had cheated out of weakness, or out of anger, or greed, or curiosity? If I had cheated on you to prove I could live without you, and failed miserably? I shouldn't have to explain myself. This one time, the one time I didn't make a mistake, the one time I didn't regret, I confessed to you and asked your forgiveness.

There was a reason I betrayed you. Please consider the mitigating circumstances.

Jay arrived without forewarning, on the doorstep of our apartment in Hightstown, simply emerging out of the void into which he had vanished two years before. With a flourish, he handed me a mixed bouquet of roses and orchids. He then produced an exceptionally large bottle of Dulcet Lyre, at a time when it was in short supply. I let him into our apartment, even though he had tried to kill us once, and was capable of trying

again. I decided to take my chances with Jay.

He had quit smoking, he claimed, which flushed his face with a veneer of health I had never seen before. He gained weight, none of it flab. This extra weight he displayed nicely through a tailored silk shirt.

He had attained a kind of ethereal beauty.

“You’re not afraid I might rape you?”

“So why did you come here?” I asked, “To break my heart?”

"I just wanted to find out if it was worth it, for you. I wanted to see for myself what there is between you and Die. I wanted to see if I might still have a chance. Or if you have any regrets. Or if you are happy, I want to see that too. Up close, I wanted to see your happiness, so maybe I can stop having nightmares about it."

There was something about having Jay in front of me, the only near rival you've ever had, Die, that brought all my doubts and regrets rushing to the surface. I wanted to confide in Jay, I wanted to say, Die is fun, but self centered and lazy. He will never amount to anything. He is no one I would ever want to marry. But I didn't say that.

"I don't know," I said.

“I love you, Phoenix. I don’t know what else to say. You’re the only woman I can love, now. That’s just the way it is.”

“I love you too, Jay.”

“Do you love him more than you loved me?”

I opened Jay's present and poured myself a glass of Dulcet Lyre.

“I can't talk to you about Die and myself. I want to, but I can't.”

“I want to hear everything. How many times you did it. When was the best. When was the worst. If you cheat. If he

does. I want it all.” He spoke to me as if I were a trapped felon whose only hope was to turn state's evidence.

"Oh... God... Fuck it! Use your imagination."

“You don’t think I’m entitled to the truth?” He knew me well enough to know that I would tell him anything he wanted to know if he got me drunk enough, and he knew me well enough to know that it would not take much time to get me to that point.

He calmly announced, “You and Die destroyed me.” These were his exact words. He smiled.

"You should get destroyed more often. It seems to suit you."

Suddenly, he lost hold of his dignity, as if to demonstrate what it meant to be destroyed. He bared the destruction that lurked beneath his cocky veneer. It took me by surprise. He dissolved into burbling spasms of grief, as if his body contrived to empty its toxins by ridding itself of water. One minute he was fine, in control of the situation, and ordering me around. The next minute, he cracked. I didn't what to do, so I opened my arms to him. He shattered in my embrace. I thought we would both die of sorrow, hugging each other.

Maybe I won't tell you anymore. Maybe I won't tell you the most important part.

Maybe I should trade the truth about Jay and me for the truth about Jayne Payne.

The latest issue of Cosmo arrived, and it has distracted me. I cannot help but peruse the pages, wondering which of these picture perfect women has taken my place. Perhaps the one with the longest neck?

I recall encountering a swan the first night I arrived in Lovehollow. Don't you remember, Die?

With a sudden flurry of white feathers under the silver moon, a swan flies out of the night. It perches on the hood of the Firebird. Jay tries to shoo it away, concerned about scratches. The swan honks at him, undaunted. He tries to push it off, but his shoves meet with swift pecks. When Jay's hand retreats, the swan settles back upon the hood, lifting its head with a regal flourish. For a moment, the bird looks bored.

Die cautiously approaches the fowl with no sudden movements. The swan lets Die pet its head. When treated right, the swan becomes affectionate.

"She must belong to somebody," Jay comments.

"She is mine now," Die says, petting the soft feathers like cat fur.

Phoenix bides her time with the gun, trying to decide how to deal with the situation now that she has control of it. Things have become more complicated. How can she plot an approach to Dieter without sacrificing what she already has? She wants both birds, two in the bush. Her natural inclination has always been to play the distance, to make it hard, to put a man to his paces to see just how much effort he is willing to expend, then push him for more. But that won't work in this situation. Because of Jay, Dieter will never make the first move. So what should she do?

Wait for a moment of privacy? It will never happen as long as the gun is a factor. Make her move right in front of Jay?

She can not maintain this tension much longer.

Jay searches the grounds for a rock or a stick.

Phoenix says, "Don't get upset, Jay. It is only a story. I am writing a story. It is the first story I've written in years. I am

writing it by living it. Does it suit your tastes?"

"So, if this is a story, what are you trying to tell us?" asks Die. "What kind of story are you writing with your life? Does it have a theme? Does it have a moral?"

"I don't care for those kinds of stories. I like a story that doesn't tell you anything, that no one can figure out, something to give you an experience of nothingness, a story that acts like a drug."

"Speaking of which, do you want to get high?" Die conjures a joint.

Phoenix asks, "What kind of moral are you looking for? As Jay likes to say, what counts as moral these days anyway?"

Jay lights the joint. He takes a deep toke awaits the effects of the drug. When the pot registers, he receives his answer. "Love, for one. Love." Jay's pallid smoker's face hardens to a veneer of solemnity.

Raucous drugged laughter greet his words; a spontaneous eruption of hilarity from Die and Phoenix.

"And what's so funny?" Jay takes a hard suck from the joint; eyes watering from heat and suffocation, a martyr in an auto-da-fe of smoke and laughter, ready to die for the truth he has just pronounced.

"I don't know, it is just funny."

"I don't know either."

"To Hell with both of you."

Die and Phoenix stop laughing.

"Oh, its all right, its all right, all right," she says to Jay. She cradles her head in her hand. "It isn't funny, it is just the booze. Love isn't funny. I am trying a new approach. Call it Real Realism. If I don't live my writing, I might give into the

temptation to fall into a perpetual dream instead. I could be like Emily Dickinson, living all alone, content with nothing but poetry. Love is as good a moral as any. So my story will be a love story.”

Jay asks, “So if it is a love story, whom do you love?” He hands her the joint.

She starts to puff on the joint as if it were a cigarette. How can she phrase her confession? How can she make a play for Die right in front of Jay? She says, “The love I am writing about is between you two boys, and this intense bond you share when you don’t even like each other. You don’t understand it, yet you can’t let go. It is actually a mating strategy. Did you know there’s a whole poetic tradition based upon certain behaviors of male swans? It happens among geese, too, though they appeal less to poets. Sometimes two ganders form an inseparable friendship. When Spring stirs their mating instincts, they look to one another. But they fail. Neither male will counterfeit a feminine submission. This love they share is not a stigma. Actually, it boosts their status among the flock. And it arouses the single females, who begin to tail them. The boys eventually learn to consummate their bond through a surrogate. A woman becomes a conduit between them, a wound through which they mix their blood, through which they bind their brotherhood. They share. They observe one another without jealousy.”

“What the hell kind of point are you trying to make, Phoenix?” asks Jay.

“Yes... I am trying to make a point. I am trying to make more than one point.”

“Just... just shut up about the fucking birds.”

Phoenix continues, “Sometimes, one of the ganders forms a possessive preoccupation. He can no longer bear to watch or

share. And he dies. Without visible cause of death, without pathology, his life simply ceases. It is an instinctive behavior buried in our genes, an ancient secret encrypted in the myth of Candaules and Gyges." She improvises as she goes along, making modifications to reality to suit her needs, just as she had altered the story of Candaules and Gyges, and just as she had altered the last line of The Castle of Otranto. There is some truth in what she says, but more fiction, as she strives to elevate her version of the story. She changes the story from falsehood to myth to irrepressible force of nature. Truth is unknowable. Truth doesn't matter to her, only what works.

Phoenix takes careful aim at the swan. Die smiles at her, as if they share a private joke about her threats with the gun. He smiles and pets the swan, until its head explodes. The body of the swan goes into spasm, squirting a variety of bodily fluids from three available openings.

"Why did you do that?" Die asks, his befuddled face splattered with swan shit.

Jay has at last found a stick, and he stands at attention, holding his stick, but now he has nothing to do with it.

"I'm hungry for flesh," Phoenix says. "And I have never tasted swan meat before."

"That's not a swan. That's a goose."

"Right. This Swan is a goose."

Letter XXVII

November 28, 1990

Dear Phoenix,

Maybe we should hold onto our secrets. Hold them close to the breast. Not that I'm not eaten up with curiosity. I'm just trying to estimate the price tag on your revelations. And the value. No matter what you say, I will have to wonder whether it is true. And even if it is true, and even if I do believe what you reveal, what good will it do now? What are you trying to do? Inflate my regrets?

There is another factor at play that is hard to describe. A sense of auspiciousness surrounds our Flick. It is gaining a buzz just from the half finished screenplay. Offers have been pouring in. Financial support for a cut of the action. I've been turning potential investors away. Who needs outsiders? Looking over my shoulder. Their only concern, the bottom line. It means a loss of control. Fortunately, Curtis Ensor left me more than enough money to hit the production values I'm looking for. Without resort to bankrolled cretins.

A synergistic rush of random events creates an aura of a great cultural event in the making. A Birth of a Nation of Porn. Out on the street, I have everyone believing my own hype. Including me. It gives me a pump of energy. A sudden, inexplicable interest has been percolating in the tabloids about a certain mysterious woman from my past rumored to have broken my heart. A shadowy lost love responsible for what the pop-psychologists call my Don Juanism. Who could she be? A number of my ex-lovers have

rushed forward to claim the honor. Old girlfriends and one night stands. Brokering their illusions for pocket change. My denials only add interest to the matter. Who could she be?

The hype.

The buzz.

The pump.

You as writer.

Swan as star.

Coalescence.

The first time I saw Swan outside the context of a product, she and Iream Insider had gotten into a luminosity contest at one of those private parties. Outshining all the other heavenly bodies. Giving off an intensity. Gravity churned between them as their orbits grew tighter. To the world, she was strictly married to a Wall Street lawyer. Still is as a matter of fact-- or rather, as a matter of technical detail. Not for much longer.

Now you may wonder why a woman like Swan would trade the runways of Paris for the back alleys of Porn. Love is one reason. Not an entirely awful one. A gambler by nature. Risk seduces her. The size of it. Still furious at the loss of income that followed a string of lurid gossip exposes on her private affairs, which happened around about the time she slid past the 30 year mark, she would do it for spite and shock value. That she would even think about such a career move shows she's got a self-destructive drive equal to the task of playing you.

From Swan's jaded personal perspective, my industry is no less squalid than hers. Given the artistic freedom I have promised, the quality of the product, and her love for the leading man, she says it would feel less like hooking than anything she's done for money in the past fourteen years. Including marriage.

I'm taking a vacation from performing. My first in two years. Sitting in the bedroom of a hotel in the Cayman Islands, I total my losses for the past week. You would not believe what they charge for a view of an empty beach. Half of what the tabloids would pay for a shot of Swan and I completing our tans. I guess it is worth it. With only two months under our belts, it is too soon to comment on how long she can keep this up. We've talked about fidelity. A major change of lifestyle for both of us. Maybe it is a sign of the times.

We've even talked about marriage. Possibly even... dare I say it... little cygnets.

If such a hypothetical marriage were to take place, it would be after *The Flick* is finished. Timing is everything. We would want the maximum publicity spin.

Swan's involvement will complicate production. Astrally projected problems in equal measure to her stellar gravity. On the set, I will have to deal with the most prime of prima donnas. You wanted romantic verisimilitude. In return, I lose directorial control over my most important player. Tat for tit.

I could probably stand to watch-- and even direct-- *Iream Insider* explicitly fucking my woman. I've been in this business long enough. I'm enough of a pro. There are mitigating factors here.

1. Friendship.
2. Activities that have taken place in the past, repeatedly.
3. The clear lack of doubt as to who the lady prefers.

I'm a pro. There are survival skills you pick up on the set. Or the business destroys you.

I could do it.

But I can't tell Swan I could do it.

So... for the two Jay/Phoenix sex scenes, the sex will have to be simulated. Normally, simulation is an absolute taboo. I work in the Cinema of Truth. If it isn't true, the audience will know right away. They're fucking carnivore junkies. They want their Meat Shots. They want a lay. Not a lie. It has to be true to work. But surprisingly, simulation may work to a quirky commercial advantage here for this one film.

We showcase Swan. The early scenes with Jay will be teasers. The payoff will come at the end. A Die and Phoenix climax.

My scene with Grace on the beach poses a similar problem, but it will be easier to work around. At the moment Eerie Canal leads over all other contenders for the part of Grace. We can simulate the beach scene for the Flick, then splice in Meat Shots from an old beach scene Eerie and I did way back when.

Even so, Swan and I will have to deal with watching each other roll around in the arms of an ex. But that won't bother Swan because it's like the problems real movie stars have.

I know what you're thinking. How much I've changed. What happened to the jealous rages that trashed our apartment more than once? Is this the same person? Who can watch his maybe wife to be in flagrante delicti? Funny, isn't it? There's lots of drives you learn to control when you're in this business.

But here's the truth, Phoenix. I haven't changed. I am still full of jealous rages. Only for you. I haven't let go of you enough, I suppose. I can't bear the thought of your being with anyone but me.

I love Swan, I think. It is hard to tell. Swan has been hiding behind you. Right now, she is asleep. Her hair combed over one eye. Three gold cigarette butts lie stinking in the ashtray. An empty bottle of Dulcet Lyre has blue lipstick stains on the

opening.

Maybe this is love.

There is something familiar going on here.

Swan claims she is throwing herself into the part. She found your old letters shoved in a broken shoe box full of baseball cards, mementoes of all sorts, perfumed and otherwise. She has been reading them aloud. With no formal skills as a thespian, she's resorting to the method. Or so she says. You're becoming a fixation for her. A habit. A heroine. I think it is a true bi-sexual's response to her only rival. More and more, I have a growing sense that I owe this affair to you.

Swan eyeballs your pictures. Especially the recent nudes. She agrees with you. They're tasteful, she says. But you wouldn't like the way she said it.

One night I encouraged her impersonation. She had on a red wig, and an old pair of panties you left behind.

"I have a fantasy," I said to her. "I want you to play along. It is something I long to do with Phoenix, but I will never get the chance."

"What all is involved?"

"You have to be Phoenix. Not just Swan pretending to be Phoenix, but Phoenix herself."

"Will it be fun?"

"You are her, now."

"Okay, I am her."

"Light up a cigarette."

She did.

"Have a drink."

She did.

"You are really Phoenix, now. Look me in the eye."

She did.

"Phoenix, let me tell you who I am fucking..."

Swan doesn't bring out possessiveness, fury and rage the way you do. Is that a sign of less than love? I don't know.

Swan doesn't inspire the visions either, the creativity. No, to the extent I'm on a roll right now, pumped up with inspiration, it all flows from having you back in my life. Even the little you've allowed. I wish things had worked out differently between us. I wish there were some way we could mend our rifts. It's not possible. I am not going to try anymore. I give up. Let's finish our screenplay. As you once said to me, "Let's get it out of our systems and proceed with our lives."

I'm sorry to deprive your mean streak of the pleasure of turning me down. If you should happen to think of some other way I can give you pleasure, let me know. I'll do my best.

Would I marry to recruit a star? I would, you know. If it were the right star. I guess love is like everything else in the world. It doesn't matter if it is true, just so long as it works.

I've always been a whore for art.

You want money? My marriage will fill your pockets.

Love,

Die

Letter XXVIII

December 1, 1990

Dear Die:

I have always resisted revealing the full circumstances of my betrayal to you because I felt entitled to forgiveness. This entitlement is of the unconditional variety. I am going to tell you the whole story now. You have been after this story all along, haven't you? You used this screenplay venture as a ruse, to coax me into divulging the secret I have kept for all these years. It has been your purpose, I suspect, to learn what went wrong between us, with the intention, I have hoped, to set things right. Sorry to say, this forced revelation depletes the value of any forgiveness you or I might be inclined to grant hereafter.

I thought I might hold out for one more letter, to give you one last opportunity to puzzle it out on your own, but I have run out of patience.

On that night in Hightstown, when Jay returned, I said to him, "What you did to Die and me, that was terrible. We nearly died, you know. You nearly killed us. But what I did to you... that was even worse. I wish I could make it up to you somehow."

"You can tell me everything about you and Die, like I asked. I want it all."

He kept probing, kept insisting. He seemed to have a unhealthy interest in my feelings toward you, a voyeuristic curiosity.

We talked and I drank. We reminisced. And before I knew it, I was telling him everything.

He listened, taking in my pornographic confessions with bemused interest.

“Okay, Phoenix. That’s what I wanted to hear. That's what I came for. Now I can tell you how I feel about you. I don’t need to say my love is like a burning flame. I don't need to say my love for you is a lit fart that cooks my ass and won’t be extinguished until the methane runs out, and all that over bloated crap that you lay on everybody. Nothing you just said changed anything for me. I still love you.”

“I’m sorry.”

"There is one thing you can do to make it up to me. One last favor."

At this point I was very drunk. "Anything, Jay. Anything at all."

“One last time, to last me for the rest of his life."

"Jay..."

"For the last two years, my life has been empty, it is like I've been dead, Phoenix. I need you, even if it is for only one time. Bring me back to life.”

They were inside the old house, in Lovehollow.

In the foyer, Die finds an old whale oil lamp, now filled with stale kerosene. He kindles the lamp, creating a circle of light in the darkness. The circle floats with him as he walks.

The three of them roll through the darkness to a spiral staircase.

The walls are shedding two centuries worth of wall paper. Layer after layer, the elegant designs peel from the wall, each one

more promising, like the veils of harem dancer.

Somewhere in the course of its history, the house had served as a shelter for drug lords or their victims. Bullet holes peppered the wall paper. Needles and broken syringes lay scattered across the stairs.

Suddenly, a draft blows out the light.

Darkness.

Then forms begin to curdle out of the void, umber on ebony. Her pupils widen as rods in her eyes become dark-adapted. Under the vaguest hint of light, she believes that the boys can almost see-- almost, just barely see-- her standing on the teetering stair case, lifting her t-shirt to bare her breasts. She has been aroused by the way two men are competing for her.

"Take my lighter," says the voice of Phoenix. Dimly etched in starlight, Die's hand explores the darkness.

Die's hand touches her face, then pulls away. She bares her breasts again, wanting to feel the wind. Die's hand hangs in the darkness in front of her, waiting for her gift.

This time in the darkness, she lowers her shorts. A pulse of blue flickers from distant, cross reflected lightning. Subtly lit pubic hair looks like the smoldering ruins of a flame devastated forest. A distant portion of the staircase shines, very briefly in blue. Did the men see her naked between them? She can't tell. She hopes they did, but she also hopes they have the propriety not to say anything about it. She has always had an instinct for exhibitionism, which she's rationalized away as a kind of reciprocal response to all the men who like to look at her.

What is Phoenix trying to provoke? She is much too drunk to decide. What would be more thrilling: a savage fist to fist combat and a wet surrender to the victor? Or both men taking her

at once?

She hands off the fire.

By the time Die reignites the lamp, her t-shirt is back in place.

He's inciting her. He doesn't seem to care if the gun goes off. The conflict has become a stark entertainment.

The rainfall patters. Water begins to stream down the walls, and the narrow, winding stairwell became soaked. The steps were slippery with revitalized fungus.

Various curios lay scattered along the stairs, delicately wrapped as if awaiting the return of a meticulous owner. But the wrapping is not of tissue, as would first appear, but rather of cobweb. Jay plucks up an opera cane, its golden brightwork crowned by the bust of a bow-tied toff wearing a top hat; the shaft barbed was with embedded hypodermic needles.

"I wouldn't be surprised to find a stiff lying around here someplace. Some of this stuff would be valuable if it were in better condition." He looks the bust in the eye. "I can't think of a reason --short of someone croaking suddenly-- for leaving this place like this. So much valuable shit."

"Once I found a funeral urn upstairs," says Die.

Jay says "I'll bet it belongs to whoever is haunting this place. You can feel a ghost's eyes on you. Hanging out. Watching everything we do."

With each step, the stair case moans. The lamp stays lit. The moans come faster and faster as the climbers approach the peak.

John Holmes helped me with the enclosed sequences. He really helped me, supplying the male parts. He managed to

produce a somewhat clumsy, but recognizable approximation of your voice, Die, which he listened to over the course of countless films. He made me laugh. But then, he began to imitate Jay's voice, with chilling accuracy. We were surrounded by the very furniture from this scene, which I had confiscated from Lovehollow and reupholstered. I reached for the gun, the very gun that Jay used to own. It was still in the glove compartment when I inherited the Firebird, and I have started keeping it in my apartment.

I trained the gun on John.

“Is it loaded?” he asked.

“It has to be loaded. If it isn't loaded, it won't make an effective prop. It helps me to remember.”

In Lovehollow, three lives converge around a circle of wavering light, their orbit centered by a gun gripped in fingers with silver nails.

Phoenix says, “Don't bother asking for the gun. I am into it, for the moment, getting off on the control it gives. Though I'm not in control of myself, it's good enough to be in control of you.”

Then she mused, “I always used to hate guns, maybe because of the way my father obsesses about his collection. Perhaps some hereditary predisposition is finally squeezing to the surface of my life, a new puberty, a violent coming of age. Yeah, I could be a bang freak.”

Jay says, “This is your fault, Die, you and your stupid heroics.”

“You tried to push her around.”

"I have made the boys fight. Aren't I the bad one?"

Phoenix has the clearest sense of a story repeating itself, a kind of haunted moment, of someone sitting on the same couch, holding the same gun, hearing the same words in a different mouth. It had happened before. It would happen again.

She drinks Dulcet Lyre from an old ceramic mug. She drains the mug, and hands it to Jay. Running her finger around an epic mural design which encircles the mug's rim, she says, "Get me another drink. And this time serve it in a glass that doesn't tell the story of the hunt for the Caledonian boar."

Halfway through this recollection, acting out from rough notes, I confronted John. He scarcely glanced at the rough notes I had handed him, seeming to pluck accurate strands of dialogue from his own mind.

"How the hell do you know so much about me?"

"I remind you of Jay. I think you like that about me. You like my being Jay. Say the word, and I will slide into his slot."

"What's going on?" I demanded.

He said, "We think of ourselves as individuals, but that is not reality."

"I've been hearing that a lot lately."

"You see, it's true."

"I've been hearing it too often. It makes me wonder about the kind of company you've been keeping."

"People change identities all the time. If your old boyfriend really wanted you back, he would change into someone else."

"I don't understand."

"You changed, didn't you? Aren't you a different person from the one you used to be."

He sat back, expecting me to be impressed.

I said to him, "You fail to appreciate the risks you're taking. I have been in a lunatic asylum. I have a loaded gun in my hand. And right now, I feel very threatened."

When lightning flares, their horizons expand; the shower of blue electrons provides a brief glimpse of the full depth of the long un-lived-in living room. Clusters of hypodermic needles had been poked into the wood and twinkle like false stars in the fifteen foot vaulted ceiling. The room creates the immediate impression of luxuriously wasted space-- an indulgence of a less populated time. A heavy rain pours through a broken window. The rain soaks the cadmium velvets of an arm chair more lush with fungus than upholstery. Floor planks of oak curl like exposed ribs. Crippled furniture leans at odd angles, with the notable exception of a Shaker rocking chair, which holds in its upright, formal posture. There is also a broken hookah and a scorched coke pipe.

The skewered body of the goose is roasting in the bedroom fireplace.

The lightning glare fades long before the lumbering roll of thunder catches up to it, and the room's depth closes back around the pale yellow circle of light.

After awhile, Jay returns with a new glass, full.

Phoenix holds up a half peeled banana, as if to make an announcement. A large lit candle has been mashed into the banana's top.

"The symbolism is too obscure for my tastes," says Jay.

"It is the closest fucking thing I could find to a birthday cake out in this wilderness," Phoenix says.

Jay smacks his own forehead. "I can't believe I forgot. After all these years. I am truly sorry. I haven't brought a present or anything."

Die breaks into a grin. "You always forget my birthday. You never buy me a present. It doesn't matter anymore. At least Phoenix remembered."

"It is an easy date."

Phoenix takes a hard gulp of her drink, finishing it. At the bottom of the glass lies a picture of a boar, a spear stuck in its throat. She throws the glass at Jay, and says "You never listen to me."

He picks up the glass, prepared to throw it back at her, but she raises the gun.

Phoenix stares into the fire, and the rotating goose above it, sweating out its fats. "I know a good present you could give Dieter..."

She puts down the gun, as if surrender has been offered as a present. But the truth of the matter is that she requires both hands to pull off her shirt.

"Me," she says.

Dieter looks at her bared breasts. Then he looks at the bird. He tests its crisp skin with a large fork. "Our goose is cooked," he says.

I thought that if I could grant Jay's one request, as terrible as it was, that if we made love for a final time that it would heal him.

And that it would heal me as well, for I found myself consumed with self loathing every time I thought about what I had done to him, of the accusation, and the lie. I needed absolution.

So I gave in to him, surrendering my body to satisfy a deep and long standing debt. I did it to atone. I offered up myself on the sacrificial altar, not only for the wrongs I had done to Jay, but for the wrongs you had done as well. I gave myself to Jay to purchase some repentance, for both of us.

I am not going to lie about the way it was between Jay and me on that afternoon. Perhaps you would think more highly of me if I said it was a loathsome experience, that his show of weakness made my skin crawl, or that I was so in love with you my body was incapable of rapture with a different male. But that would be a lie. I promised you honesty in this letter, even though it is a habit I have been strained to cultivate.

Perhaps because I approached Jay selflessly, motivated by charity, my body responded in unexpected ways. To my surprise, Jay had acquired new skills as a lover.

I found myself spread and impaled upon a rack of ecstasy. Even though I had been forced into this circumstance, I did not want to let go of him.

Jay takes a step backward, grabbing the lamp, and with it, the circle of light.

Phoenix bares her breasts and waves her gun, unable to decide which gives her a greater feeling of power.

Jay turns away from Phoenix, trying to hide his tears. Then he breaks into a run, crashing wildly into the corridor.

Phoenix rises and follows, resuming her hold on the gun, but also snatching up the banana with the candle. She needs something to light her way. Die starts to trail after her, but she waves him back, and he retreats into the darkness of Lovehollow.

By the flickering light of the candle wobbling in its banana scone, Phoenix sees that the corridor was flooded. She sashes through the stream, immersed up to her knees, calling for Jay. Light flashes reflect off the waves; indigo stripes undulate over her skin.

Around the mouth of a new passage, in the flow of current, algae sways like a grass skirt on a hula dancer. The course is narrow, the passage tight, but greased by slime. She squirts through.

Throbbing rivulets vein the surrounding interior walls. Scattered bullet holes admit flashes of lightning, thin tubes of illumination intermittently transecting the corridor.

Phoenix follows the sound of weeping to another bedroom, this one filled by a pool of stagnant water. In the center of the flooded room, like the bull's-eye of a wet target, bobs a huge pump organ. Sucking, vorticular waves circumscribe the organ's length. Years in the water has wrought a sea-change. The Rosewood frame writhes in driftwood patterns; the cracked keys have a mother-of-pearl sheen.

Another flash of lightning brightens three tinted wine goblets, depression crystal, which had been set upon the organ. The vibrato of electricity shakes the crystal; a brief illusion of trembling. Indigo depths warn of a heavy lead content. Each goblet one is one third full of an amber fluid and each holds three cigarette butts. The butts float like swans.

Phoenix wades over to the keyboard, and sets aside her gun.

She balances the flaming banana. After using the flame to light a dampened cigarette, then she tests the keyboard's action. Music fills the flooded chambers. She tries to call out to Jay with her music, tries to lure him out of hiding with her untuned and atonal siren's lament. The music echoes through halls, through the house, exotic and watery as the warble of micturition. A musty scent wheezes out from the pipes.

Jay glides into the room with the stealth of a water moccasin. He has pulled off his wet shirt and has wrapped it around his neck. A cigarette hangs from his lips.

Phoenix says to him, "I honestly was not expecting you to be upset. I thought you two traded women all the time."

"I wanted you to be different." He snuffles.

More water streams into the room, eclipsing the doorway with wetness. A churning underwater suction tugs at their loins. Phoenix plays on. The notes gurgle in the room's weird acoustics. She plays drowning music.

She says, "I used to share a man with my best friend, Sonja. I found it a warm and lovely experience." She sucks on her cigarette and it hisses.

"Who the fuck is Sonja? How come I never heard of Sonja before?"

"She stopped talking to me."

She gets tired of the cigarette, which is wet and dying anyway, and she drops it into the third goblet, which makes it the forth butt floating in the third goblet. Jay responds by sweeping away all three goblets with an angry gesture.

"I hate asymmetry," he says.

She plays. Her music rumbles wetly, more vibration than anything else, the swan song of a soprano descending the

maelstrom. A new rush of water cascades over the door frame; only a slice of opening remained.

She says to him, "I haven't heard anything like a proposal from you."

"You're not likely to hear one now." Jay shakes his head, a betrayed grimace twisting his lips.

Flotsam clogged the eddies; dirty needles knitted together with spider webs and half filled syringes bobbing like lost buoys.

Phoenix kept on playing watery music, banging it out, indifferent to the flooding chambers, seemingly intent on dragging down anything male that came near her.

"Dieter Smith is not even remotely the kind of man I would ever want to marry. But once, just once, fucking him would be fun, so that it won't be an issue anymore. I am attracted to him to the extent of one night. I want to put it behind me."

"I guess that's one way to put it."

"God damn it, Jay!" She shouts, "You are months past the point where you should have committed yourself. I am God damn past tired of waiting. I thought it would be kind of fun for you to give me some space with Die for just one night, just one. I thought it would be good for a laugh. You can watch if you want."

"I think that would kill me."

"The trouble is, you know, I think that is exactly what is going to happen. I think I am going to end with Die, and I think it is going to kill you. Maybe I knew that is exactly what has been in the making all along; the story predates my involvement, its structure preempts my authorship. I'm just a character in this story, whether I'm writing it down or someone else is. The foreshadowing is all in place. You can see what's going to happen."

"I don't get it, Phoenix. What is going to happen? Just one night, or more than that? What are you trying to tell me?"

A round silver object floats past the organ. The object resembles a trophy of some kind, a small sculpture. It carrousel through the currents, seeming somehow very important, its sudden appearance bearing a message among the buoyant needles and hash pipes. A single word has been engraved upon its silvery surface: "Truth."

A halo of tarnished cherubim spin along the top rim of the silver object. It is decorated with a confusion of wings and expressionless babies. A trio of saints with outstretched arms strike poses shamelessly patterned from figures on Rodin's Gates of Hell.

Truth spins in circles.

Phoenix tries to grab the object alleged to be Truth, but it eludes her. For a moment it doubles back toward her, teasingly, caught in a trick of eddies. She jumps up from her wet seat, and begins to chase it. Jay follows her into the flooded hall.

The stream sluices into another corridor. The silver object bounces down another set of stairs.

They chase the silver object into a dry bedroom. The silver object rolls past a row of chairs that had been covered with sheets. The chairs stoop like crippled ghosts. The sheets, originally lace, have acquired a layer of haze. The same sort of haze clings to mahogany shelves behind the chairs, and blurs the repository of new broken treasures: a full set of depression crystal, goblets full of old Methedrine capsules that had congealed into slag, and one half of a Chinese dish, its gilded trim scratched and scarred by razor blades; a can wrapped in the moldy remnants of a Georgia O'Keefe fruit label and filled with the cemented remains of what

was once resinous hashish. A platoon of hand crafted tin soldiers guard an alabaster cameo set upon a backdrop of shimmering butterfly wings. Dressed in historically accurate French uniforms from the Napoleonic era, each soldier has been fastidiously painted with miniature medals and individuated faces. Some carried needle thin bayonets, but others, whose rifles had been removed, carried small silver spoons.

The light of the flaming banana sweeps across a collection of ivory statuettes, sensuous heathen gods and goddesses: Zeus, Athena, Venus, and Pluto, heroic nudes six inches tall. Hermes sports an erection, in keeping with a certain classical tradition.

Jay bends over to pick up the object labeled as Truth. He brings it over to Phoenix. On closer inspection, she sees that it is a funeral urn. She contemplates the significance of the engraved word. What Truth? This was their message, truth, but an incomprehensible truth that could be a name or an epitaph.

"Don't mess with it," Jay says.

"What should you do when find Truth? Leave it where it lies?"

She tries to pry the urn open, but it is hopelessly jammed, or perhaps welded shut.

"Leave it alone."

"I want to see what kind of truth it contains." But it won't open.

She aims the gun at the urn. She cocks the hammer.

"Don't do it," says Jay.

She shoots. A great explosion of grey dust fills the room, and forms a grey cloud which drifts slowly through the air, a fine grey mist. The particulate finally settles on the bed, a waiting magnificent antique four-poster, crowned by a canopy of stained

lace.

As the dust settles on the bed, it clings to something coiling and sticky, something like sheets of smoke trapped under the great canopy. The smoke harbors a ravenous female appetite, which Phoenix can sense. It calls to her, a sisterhood of death within the smoke.

"It's over," she says to Jay.

He forces her onto the bed. The pressure of their weight raises clouds of dust from the bed. They roll together, engulfed in cumulus.

Their flesh collides. A different man would be using his fists, breaking her bones-- but he expresses his rage by trying to force her into ecstasy, trying to devastate her with rapture and regret. He has run the scales of her passion many times in the past, a virtuoso among the drenched chambers where notes of pleasure lie concealed. He tries to play a familiar theme-- but fails.

The force of their struggle rocks the room.

An ivory god leaps from his mahogany Olympus. A goddess follows.

"Stop," she cries.

But he does not stop; he is too aroused and enraged, and engorged to stop, even though another god falls.

He crashes into her, harder and faster. The bed timbers beat out a steady drum roll; the thick dust whirling and billowing in visual rhythm. The bed boils forth a dense congealing mist.

"Stop, oh please..."

Tremors continue to shake the room. The depression crystal begins to tumble down, shattering on impact. Vibrations start the tin soldiers marching. They march off the shelves like lemmings. Buttons fall, pattering as they hit.

A chipped goddess falls.

For a moment, their struggles cease as they both look upward, and both see, together in the same instant, a constellation of small red shapes, red hourglasses, hanging on smoky webs. Hundreds of black widow spiders nest in the canopy above them.

“DIE!” she screams. She rolls off the bed, and Jay rolls with her. As they strike the floor, the rotten oak beams cracked. Streams of termites pour from the lightning shaped rift.

“Die!” she yells, but Jay will not relent, even as the floor boards snap around them. She wonders how Die will respond to her cries this time around. Will he hear the genuine panic in her voice? Or will he think this is another one of her traps?

There is only a cloud of dust, the shuddering floor, the trinkets and treasures falling and breaking.

Phoenix screams, “DIE!! DIE!! DIE!!”

Die appears in the hallway. She has been dying for him to play the hero all night. He tried once, without success. Now his time has come.

“He raped me,” says Phoenix.

Die erupts in a rage. He grabs Jay, naked and struggling. He lifts Jay into the air, and turns to throw him onto the bed.

“Not the bed...” screams Jay.

Die flexes his arms, preparing to throw despite the pleas. But just before he launches his naked friend, he sees something. The dust clears enough, just in time, or his eyes adjust to the darkness, just in time, and he sees the swarm of black widow spiders rolling through the lace.

Die turns suddenly and alters the trajectory of his toss. Jay hurtles into the cabinets.

Jay lies still in a litter of broken gods. Then he moans and

pulls himself up on one arm.

Jay says, "I never raped her."

The light of the burning banana reveals new ornaments studding Jay's flesh. He had landed in a different nest, filled with a different kind of poison. Countless old syringe needles bristled in his naked flesh. He wore an expression of pained betrayal, bleeding and penetrated by shafts like St. Sebastian. And then, as a final gesture of surrender, Jay abandons to Die what will be both prize and punishment, reward and revenge.

He says, "This has been a swapping scheme, all along. Whether you realize it or not. But this time it isn't our scheme. It's Phoenix's doing. Something she orchestrated and conned you into. Stay with her long enough, and you'll find out about the way she lies."

Jay stumbles out of the room, heading down the corridor, pulling needles out of his flesh.

Naked except for dust, Phoenix lies on the ground.

The front door slams.

The Firebird growls.

That day in Hightstown, Jay turned to me when we were finished making love, a self satisfied grin bloating across his face; you know the grin, that peculiar grin, Jay's grin. I thought he was gloating over having brought me to rapture again and again during what had started out as a penance, a half hearted pity-fuck.

"This doesn't mean we're getting back together," I said and covered myself with the sheet.

"You're fucked. Totally fucked."

It was a moment of crystalline insight, Die, as though this betrayal had been ordained by grand purpose, for it not only

offered a full and complete absolution from the sins I had committed against Jay, it also freed some faculty of my will from the restraints that made me doubt my future with you, Die. It was as if I could think clearly at that moment, without being stunned into submission by you. My decision, my commitment could be made, and not as the product of craving. Jay had sated me, and I could think clearly enough to know who I wanted to be with, at that moment, and forever. And then it all poured out of me, parts of poems, parts of love letters, parts of confessions I had said to you so many times they had become clichés between us.

I blurted out to Jay, "You want it all, you want the truth? I am in love with Die. Love. And more than Love. Some force links us. An adamantine umbilicus I can not sever no matter how hard I try. This love is the focal point of my being, the absolute pivotal event. It takes me outside of time, as if I am dying and being remade every moment I am with him."

"You are fucked. Totally fucked."

"I'm not going to lie about this, Jay. You can tell Die, if you want. I will deal with it. He'll be mad. It may take him awhile to get over it. But he will get over it. And he will forgive me. I know it in my heart, because Die and I don't have a choice in the matter. We have to forgive each other, for everything, and for always."

He smiled, "You are fucked."

"This, I think, is the point at which you walk out of my life, forever."

Suddenly he had changed, and was wearing the same sallow, sweaty, poisoned look that he had the last time I saw him, the night he fled Lovehollow.

Jay spoke with a stammer that had never been there before,

and a new punctuation to his discourse, a rhythmic snuffle, a cough crustier than his usual smoker's hack. "You are fucked because I have a terrible disease." He said it as it was a point of pride. "I am infected with a virus. I caught it from the needles that night in Lovehollow. You know, you killed me when you lied that night. You and Die both killed me."

He seemed to have lost weight just in the course of our lovemaking. All semblance of health seemed to have been sweated out of him.

"You destroyed me, Phoenix. I mean, really destroyed me. And now I have destroyed you. This virus, you've caught it now. That's how it spreads, through sex. It'll kill you. And if you ever fuck Die again, it'll kill him too."

I couldn't speak. It was as if his hand were on my throat. But his hands were calmly fastening the buttons on his shirt.

"I'm glad it turned out this way, Phoenix. It's much better this way."

"Better? Better than what?"

"One way or the other, I was going to infect you. If I had to, I would have raped you, Phoenix."

Now do you understand why I took a razor to my wrist on that night in Hightstown? Now do you understand?

You might not understand why I forgave Jay, or why I visited him day after day in the Hospital, or why I offered what ever solace I could while he was dying. Let me explain it, or at least try. Part of my motivation sprang from my own guilt, my sense of having caused Jay's death indirectly. But more than that, I was driven to forgive for the sake of forgiveness itself, unconditionally, no matter how deeply I had been wronged. I forgave Jay, as I hoped to be forgiven.

For the longest time, I refused to be tested for HIV. I was certain I would test positive.

Every itch I felt in my loins threatened the onset of intractable Candida. When the sheets were overly damp in the mornings, I called it night sweats. Every pimple, every mole, every blemish signaled the emergence of Kaposi Sarcoma. If fruit juice tasted slightly tart, it was the beginning of thrush causing fermentation in my mouth. Not surprisingly, I began to lose weight. Hypochondria now offered a new, procrastinating form of suicide; slow and incremental, to replace the cigarettes I had recently given up.

I was shocked, absolutely shocked, almost to point of being disappointed, when the test came back negative.

Six months later, the retest shocked me again.

The next retest brought the realization that I had somehow escaped infection. I can not say whether it was the fear of death, or the attaining of mercy, that brought about my religious transformation. It didn't happen suddenly; none of the heraldic revelations that you would expect from me, as many times as I have been guilty of over using epiphany as a dramatic device. The reality of God slowly impressed itself through subtle signals: the music of a beer can rolling with the wind; the cloud patterns of my own breath on a winter night; the rustling of moon-painted leaves, the warmth of intertwining fingers, the halos around stars when they shine through vapor -- things that emerge from the darkness and remind you that not all of life is hideous.

Do you remember the night we lay naked on the termite eaten floors of Lovehollow, wrapped in each others arms, watching the wedding feast of a black widow spider? The female began to chew the male's head before his hind quarters finished

rutting; a vision of competition and cooperation which characterizes the course of all life. And I said to you that I believed there was some basic tendency in nature, some thermodynamic or mathematic principle that opposes entropy in its operation and explains life and evolution without resort to religion. What I failed to understand, wrapped in your arms, is that this basic tendency in nature, this undiscovered physical or mathematic law, is God.

I was convinced, when giving in to Jay on that afternoon, that I was doing the right thing. As I undressed for Jay, preparing to suffer for your sins as well as my own, I thought, I will not try to hide this from Die, and I will never regret this, even if Die leaves me for confessing the truth. Even if Die never forgives me and I lose him forever. It was something that I had to do, that afternoon. It was a debt I owed.

When I found that I had been spared, I believed that I had done the right thing with Jay on that afternoon, just as I came to believe that losing you was part of a pattern of sacrifice which God expected of me.

I lost myself somewhere in the old days. The more pretenses I used to put on, the more pretenses I was forced to make, to keep my stories consistent. The process became too complicated for me, too unbelievable. I have been trying to make sense out of the story that has become my life, trying to find meaning in the interface between the real and the false, and the friction between. But I became lost in there someplace, and everything I said seemed pointless, incomprehensible. In the old days, I kept trying to act as if I were in control, as if I really understood the events of my life, but I was bluffing. I was trying to lie my way out.

Now that I have confessed my deepest secret, I will give you

the rest of the truth. None of my feelings for you have changed. My love for you defines my life and disparages all other attractions. Every cell in my body yearns to be infused and intermingled with your substance. Every subatomic particle of my soul yearns for the same sort of fusion. Every action I take, every verb encompassed in my being, inclines toward conjugation with you. And yet, the closer we move toward connection, the more our enterprise portends of dread results, a threat, a warning, like the horrible thing that happened to us the first time we made love. Nightmarish manifestations of our past stain the present you give me. I want to reach out to you. I want to be with you, Die, but something is going on that bewilders and terrifies me. Warning signs surround me, though I cannot comprehend their meaning.

I want to see you Die.

Yours,

Phoenix

Letter XXIX

December 6, 1990

Dear Phoenix,

I had not expected this to happen. But I should have known it would. This always happens when we make contact.

You want to see me? Or you want to see me dead? You are so fucking coy.

You know, Phoenix, I would fly to meet you at a moment's notice if it didn't mean The Flick would be fucked. You've given me a choice. When you know that I am among the decisiveness impaired.

Your last letter inspired a frantic bout of writer's block. I never thought I would have that problem with this particular script. It being my own life and all. But every time I'd sit down to write, I'd get the urge to do something else. Something pressing. Like floss my teeth. Or clip my toenails. Or feed the gold fish. (I have a goldfish I named after Jay. Fortune Nada.)

Our courses seem to have turned parallel. Headed toward a vanishing point. Mind if I ask you to finish the script on your own?

I didn't think I ever stood a chance of ever getting you back. I wouldn't have done this, wouldn't have set these forces in motion quite this way if I knew this was going to happen.

We had some times, you and I. Not just in Lovehollow, but all the other times. I think of them also. I remember... I remember so well... every single time I had you. Every time was fantastic. Even the night your old man walked in on us and pulled

out his that colt 45 of his and chased me butt naked while he screamed and wheezed through the streets of Boston until his fucked up lungs forced him to back off...

And the all-night Saturnalia party we threw in Berkeley... against a sound track of authentic chants... when all of our friends got drunk on Dulcet Lyre... and half of them woke on the golf course five miles up the road and the other half woke next to strangers...

And the wild show you put on the dance floor of The Inferno-- oh, God, that was funny. Bailing you out afterward was not so funny...

And the time we broke up for good and you jumped the airport security line and set off all the alarms, just to give me one last kiss...

And here we are again, still trying to figure out what the fuck to do about each other.

Do you want to see me, or do you want to see me dead?

I haven't slept. I haven't written anything but this letter. What is my problem?

I think it is your long and slender lips. I hope your lips are still pink. I think about sliding my tongue between them. The texture. Soft. Tissues inside shaped like clouds. Wet fractals. A lesson in how fractals hold infinity. And yet for all the impacted endlessness at your end, you always tasted empty and hungry. And the flavor. No one else serves up such a rich pudding of mucus membranes, ph balanced. Sweetened by natural sugar. I wish I were kissing you now.

I haven't a clue as to what motivates you or Swan. But I understand and appreciate a good pair of lips.

If you and I were to see each other-- to use a term you once

called a euphemism-- The Flick would never be made. Curtis Ensor's estate will only release the production money for a film that I write, direct, and star in. I, myself. Personally. Curtis said he was doing me a fucking favor. How could you and I renew our love, knowing that I would be off to the set before the afterglow was finished glowing?

Swan would be gone if you and I saw each other.

"Do you believe her?" asked Swan.

"Even when Phoenix tells the truth, it sounds like a lie.

Everything that happens to her adheres to a format. When I start stripping off the surface and find story structure, I get suspicious. It's like when the curtain lifts and reveals the true face of the great and powerful Oz. Her versions of hard core honesty make me doubt my own life."

Swan and me laughed at your letter. We kept on laughing, even through the sad parts of your letter, through your account of Jay dying. Sorry. I guess we shouldn't have laughed at that.

"This story of hers about Jay Fortunata, do you think that's what really happened?"

"Beats me. I never figured out where she and I went wrong. Spent all these years wondering. I'm still wondering."

"Bullshit. You believe her."

"I don't see what difference it makes. If Iream pulls the same stunt a year from now, and you spend the afternoon fucking him, do you think I'll forgive you?"

"You wouldn't?"

"Hell, no."

"But you forgive Phoenix. If you had heard this story earlier, tell me, honestly... would you have forgiven her and gone back to her?"

I just laughed, and hoped that would pass as answer. Swan laughed too, but it was the kind of laugh that says fuck yourself.

Which leaves me with the following options:

1. You.
2. The movie that has become the only thing I've ever done that gives me a sense of self-worth.

I can't have both. So what do I choose? Love or Art? The lady or the tiger?

On the surface, this should not be a hard choice. Option number one involves a half-mad, inconstant, lawyer-to-be. Option number two involves marriage to a rich babe whose fortune is based upon an international consensus about her being a total mega-piece. Coupled with a movie that I intend to make into a masterpiece of its ilk. Shouldn't be a hard choice.

But it is. I haven't lied to you. Maybe I haven't told you the whole story, but I haven't lied. I am still in love with you. More now than ever. And the amount of love before was a lot.

You have raised the ante. You want to play poker, Phoenix?

Ah, Phoenix. If only you chose as well as you create hard choices.

What if the last scene I wrote is all I'm going to write, Phoenix? What if I say my end is satisfied? How are you going to fulfill your end?

Love,

Die

Letter XXX

December 15, 1990

Dear Die:

Your last letter upset me very much. In the old days, when we were together, a certain mode of thought afflicted me, perhaps it was poisoning my perceptions. I had come to law school seeking a cure for that kind of thought, seeking to cleanse myself of my proclivities for fiction, living in the realm of imagination, relating to people through impressive lies. Instead, I would try to regain my footing in reality through combat. A concept lies under the legal system, the prevalent notion that truth emerges from the clash of ideas.

The library functions much as a laboratory; we drain human tragedies of their force, rendering them soft and cold enough for dissection. The process leaves these specimens as unthreatening as severed parts of anatomy, carved up into their constituent facts and law, flaccid in their decanters. Redirecting my energies in this manner, I find my views of our Flick altered; as if I had turned on a light in a darkened room. The Ghost vanishes.

I can no longer see any traces of Jay protruding through John Holmes' personality. I look back over my copies of my recent letters, and I wonder if I imagined the ghostly manifestations. Had I transmuted some ordinary gestures by some ordinary law student into the malevolent incarnation of my own guilt and loneliness? Have I banished my irrational fears by simply writing them out? Have I been dealing with a spirit incarnation of Jay? Or do these events bear the authorship of a different former lover?

Does something even more wicked than a haunting lie beneath the pattern of recent events? I wonder. A stranger suddenly walks into my life, well coached on my vulnerabilities and tastes. He seems groomed to conjure associations with one of the great loves of my life. These echoes and associations vanish after I confide them to you, Die. You know how paranoid I can be, especially where you are concerned. I considered certain possibilities, all of them loathsome and found myself sucked into a maelstrom of paranoia. I imagined you trading intimate knowledge about me with your friend Iream in return for like information about your Swan. I also imagined a plot centered around your misunderstood notions of my feelings for Jay. I imagined myself as a chattel in one of your swapping schemes, that your old commerce with Jay continues from beyond the grave, that you have bartered away our love to a corpse.

When my thoughts are properly ordered like this, and I sit in the light of the law library, I can tell myself that whenever I feel Jay's presence close to me, it is the product of my own mind, that I have been reaching too deeply into the past, vainly trying to connect with you, Die, grasping at butterflies in a dream.

I focused my attention on the coming confrontation with Professor Weiss. I would define myself in argument. I planned to use my dispute with Galen Weiss as a way to connect me to humanity, a return to the course I had undertaken before your first letter arrived. How the law differs from the tilts of my literary inclinations. My writing consists of rigged contests, games I play with myself.

The night slipped past me without sleep. Somehow I suffered no energy loss from this depravation. Fear carried me. A razored, adrenal edge bordered my consciousness; reminiscent of excessive

caffeine and nicotine indulgences back in the days we lived together-- though I had neither on that morning. For the past year and a half, I have been slowly mastering a powerful new intellectual weapon. Designed for an arena of controlled conflict, rule-governed violence, it can demolish. Or it can riddle. Never before had I carried it into combat. The excitement left me jittery. My thoughts were clear and ordered, though any loss of momentum, any surrender to anxiety would have sent me crashing into a migraine. The way my heart beat, a racing tachycardia, interrupted by frequent premature ventricular contractions, you would think I had placed myself in mortal danger, or that I was about to make love for the first time. This confrontational thrill is an aspect of law I had not anticipated.

Armed with only a pack of note cards, I entered the classroom. Fluorescent lights pulsed overhead, threatening to ignite my incipient headache. I took my seat, prearranged by a grid. My hair tied back in a tight assassin's knot, I wore my round reading glasses, and a loose fitting blouse which fastened at the throat with a sort of a bow, an acceptable feminine alternative to the Windsor knot. A blurred reflection of myself shined through the polished surface of the linoleum desk top, and I realized I had attired myself for an ambush in the fashions Galen Weiss usually wore.

John Holmes occupied the seat beside mine. He was engaged in speed reading the days assignment at a pace of about 1500 words per minute, probably with full comprehension.

I lay down the note cards one by one, in logical argumentative sequence, as if they were a tarot that held my future.

Professor Galen Weiss entered, riding her clipped, authoritative stride. Standing six foot one at the head of the class,

she surmounted the room. Her features have a hard cast of self control and personal power that at times resemble affected masculinity. You will never hear her speak in a high pitched voice or cast a limp wristed gesture, except in mockery. I suspect some lingering bitterness fuels her ambition; some grave unavenged injustice, some wounding personal tragedy related to sex or gender.

Professor Weiss took from her briefcase a pine gavel, oversized, just slightly, but enough to be noticeable. She wielded this more as symbol than noisemaker.

As the gavel boomed, John Holmes threw his law book three feet into the air and yelled, "SHIT!" A squeal came from Anna Marie Parker-Johnson, seated behind him.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Holmes?" queried Galen Weiss.

"There's a cockroach back here. Must be six inches long," he said.

"Then I suggest you put your law book to good use."

"What do you want me to do? Read to it?"

Professor Weiss shot back a distinctly irritated look. Perhaps she took the remark as an aspersion against the text. Perhaps she would have been less piqued if she were not the author.

Then I raised my hand. Galen Weiss granted an audience with a nod and a point of the gavel.

"I have a question before we move on." Then, in my best legalese, I asked, "Why does Defamatory speech merit stringent protective standards, in contradistinction to the nebulous standards applicable to sexual matters?"

"We have finished our discussion of the obscenity laws, Ms. McCullah."

"But we didn't discuss anything."

"Ah! There's a lesson in that."

"What, some kind of Zen experience?"

"The point is, some things shouldn't be discussed."

Everyone laughed. It gave me a minute to think. "You believe that sex isn't a political issue?"

Her left eyebrow raised, then she answered on automatic, as if hitting a tape recorder button: "The materials that men use to enhance their masturbation experiences do not present political issues. I am aware--of course-- of certain misguided attempts to politicize these materials because of their demonstrated tendency to promote rape and other forms of violence against women." She made a gyrating, limp wristed gesture with both hands hovering like twin helicopters at the level of her head, a signal that she considered my question unworthy. Then she gripped her gavel and pointed. "But you have to understand this unfortunate paradox: if you want a law directed at the dangers that threaten women, you must first prove a 'clear and present danger.' That's a tougher standard than the Miller test-- a standard that applies to protected speech. I commend you to American Book Sellers Association v. Hudnut, at 458 Federal Supplement 1316; affirmed at 106 Supreme Court 1172. Like it or not, Ms. McCullah, the unpredictable Miller standard is likely to be the highest degree of protection you can hope for in this country."

"But what if I am an artist? What if I wish to make an explicit statement about physical love and I need to know the limits of an arbitrary law? Is it more important to protect defamatory speech than sexual speech? Why are lies more important than sex?"

Her eyes widened. Her mouth hung wide and vacuous, stricken with surprise, a great open cavern that seemed the source

of the ensuing pervasive silence. My classmates stirred uncomfortably. Gladys Lorn, to my left, giggled under her breath. John Holmes, to my right, was staring at me as if he had never seen me before, his fingers drumming with intense concentration. Then the gavel slipped from Galen Weiss' fingers, ending the silence as it hit the desk.

I continued, "If I understand you correctly, you're saying that you fully understand the utter falseness of the rationale behind the current obscenity laws; the absurdity of claiming these works contain no ideas.

"The case law itself begins with a blatant lie. In Roth, Justice Brennan wrote: 'At the time of the adoption of the first amendment, obscenity was outside the protection intended for speech and the press.' But he cites cases and statutes dated after the ratification of the Constitution. He's not that dumb. You get the feeling he's flaunting the untruth of his claim, with a wink and a nod, just as you were doing a minute ago."

While I was talking, Weiss was picking at the barrette that tied back her hair. As she started to speak, her mouse brown locks tumbled free; straight cropped, and much shorter than I expected. On the recovery now, Weiss, suddenly aware of the nature of her adversary, responded: "It doesn't matter whether there were written laws or not. We're talking about the operation of a natural law. Aversion to sexually explicit materials was an integral part of the nation's character of the time." She slammed the barrette on the table. Her voice rumbled; deep throaty oratory tones. Sometimes you could almost feel orchestrated vibrations, a specter of grandiose music when she spoke. "If you study early American folklore, you will discover self imposed censorship. Even without government proscription, references to sex dropped from the

bawdiest of folk songs as they passed from Britain to America. Did you know that the Streets of Laredo derived from an English ballad about a trooper who dies of syphilis? I must disagree-- absolutely disagree-- with your contentions that the obscenity laws spring from false premises. It is delicately worded, because some people have a sense of propriety, Ms. McCullah. The material targeted here incites men in certain ways. It doesn't incite thought. Or discussion. It incites self abuse."

"And what is so terrible about masturbation?" asked Clive Tull. His unmistakably defensive tone drew random titters.

She threw up her hands, feigning helplessness, and uncontrolled feminine disgust, as if she were confronting a worm. "This is why I hate teaching this subject." Then her tone changed to hard determination and oratorical elegance; another sudden shift of persona. "The discussion inevitably degenerates down to this level, and I am forced, by conscience, to take sides."

Performance, as an art, consumed her. Galen Weiss started to wag her head from side to side, affecting a dull-witted stare, mocking his question. "I guess the problem with masturbation is like the problem with drugs. Too much reward for too little effort. So you start with this thing... we'll call it a work of art, to stretch a point... and its goal-- its *raison de etre* -- is to make a man perform a sex act upon himself. There's not much going on in the way of exchanging ideas. No vigorous debate, that I can see. I guess you could say the only political issue presented stems from the obscenity laws themselves." She ended her bimbo impersonation to make an emphatic point. "To say that you have to permit display of this material in order to engage in political debate about it is like saying you have to sample heroin before you can talk about the need to outlaw it."

Burton Wallace spoke up from the back of the room, thrusting his overweight form into the fray: "The good book tells us not to spill seed-- but I suppose I am not allowed to dwell on that because of the other part of the first amendment. Even so, everyone and his brother... and sister... understands on way down deep in their souls that this stuff is just wrong. You know, flat out wrong. Anyone caught with it feels humiliated. Probably because of the natural law principle Professor Weiss talked about. To my way of thinking, Society got some kind of interest in maintaining the vitality of its constituency; you know, preventing an act what studies show to be addicting--in a manner of speaking-- and depleting of the male hormones tied to alertness, vitality, and strength..."

"And aggression and violence," I add.

Gladys Lorn raised her hand, "Justice Rheinquist likened the obscenity laws to ecology laws. What's that mean? To maintain social ecology, are we supposed to take the barometric pressure of the prevailing testosterone levels?"

Everyone laughed, including John Holmes and Galen Weiss.

"Now wait a minute," says John Holmes, "Why is obscenity viewed as a strictly male form of entertainment? What about stuff that targets a female audience? You never hear about any of that stuff getting busted."

Anne Goldberg said, "I think things like Chippendale dancers and Playgirl magazine are more of a joke. They're for revenge, a kind of a joke. No one really gets turned on by them."

Gladys Lorn whispered to me, "Yeah, Playgirl, what a bore. Droop, droop, droop." She illustrated with a floppy gesture of her forefinger, three times.

Goldberg continued, reflectively, "Yes, they're a kind of a

joke. They have more idea content to them. Perhaps that's why you never hear of prosecutions."

"Misdirected jokes," said Galen Weiss, resuming her role of impresario to the legally unlearned. "In trying to satirize pornography, they're reinforcing the myths found in pornography."

Karen Wilson played chorus to Weiss' lead, "Phoenix, if you're so concerned about lies-- then what about the lies that pornography tells about women? That we are mindless, sex starved bodies, that we are objects-- that we are the same as men."

"Aren't you?" asked John Holmes. "I mean, the same as men."

"They ain't," snickered Clive Tull. "I had to turn gay just so I could get laid."

"Actually," said Holmes, "I wasn't thinking about Playgirl or Chippendales or even Candida Royale. I was thinking more about romance novels and soap operas, and that sort of stuff. Isn't that more the female equivalent of male pornography? Why doesn't anyone bust that stuff?"

"You can't equate the two."

"Well, you have a pornographic formula in use. The good males are those who are unconditionally in love with the female. They are willing to face any danger for her, spend huge amounts of money. They're willing to die for her -- and they're not supposed to ask for anything back. Specifically, he's not supposed to ask for you know what."

"And what is wrong with that?"

"Where is the quid pro quo? It is all obligation."

"Sounds like alimony," says Arnold Lauderdale, speaking bitterly from experience.

"That's pornography, isn't it?"

"Do you know what the word means?" asked Professor Weiss.

I answered, "James Joyce defined pornography as any art that tries to sell an idea. Sort of the opposite of the Miller test. But the word itself comes from the Greek: Writing about whores."

"Close but not quite. It would be more accurate to say that the term means, 'writing about captive women.' Phoenix McCullah--have you really any concept of what you are defending?" Then she turned to Karen Wilson and said, "Do me a favor. Run over to my office and bring back a book titled Demeaning the First Amendment." She tossed her keys across the room.

John Holmes said, "I'll cut to the chase. I think the core of the problem lies in... drum roll..." He beat a bongo tattoo on the linoleum desk. "...the discrepancies between the preconditions both genders impose on intercourse. Women object to their gender being portrayed in an unreal way, as a set of simplified attributes: compliant, sexually voracious, endowed with certain types of breasts, certain types of legs, a certain type of waist; etcetera. The same for applies to heroes of Romance novels and movies; desirable, devoted men. Rich men, usually, and if not rich at the outset, of the right kind of seed to become rich. I don't think we'll ever get away from the proposition that certain characteristics make for desirable mating while others do not. That's the message whenever you talk about sex, whether you call it porno or romance or Eros or smut or advertising. It ain't egalitarian, not by a long shot. Whoever doles out these desirable characteristics doles 'em out in limited supply. But that's natural selection at work. That's..." Another bongo beat. "...evolution."

"Yeah, it is the haves against the have nots," whispered Clive Tull.

"I despise this topic," said Professor Weiss.

I formed a bridge of interlocking fingers and rested my chin upon it. "You've all been focused on the aspect of art that creates a vicarious experience. And the proposition has been put forth that it is fine to outlaw vicarious sex."

"I guess that's one way to put it."

"But we're talking about Art, here. In order to turn random sensory data into a vicarious experience, there has to be an operational system of order. That order flows from ideas. If a work of art provokes a response-- be it disgust or arousal-- it is because of the response to the ideas behind the work. When a jury, using the Miller test, finds a work obscene, it is the message behind that work that they are condemning, despite all rhetoric to the contrary."

"You know, I've never before had any student show such an interest in this particular subject. It isn't something people usually admit. What is your problem, Ms. McCullah? Are you a Die Smiling fan, or something?"

I felt a sudden coldness sweep across my face, freezing it. It was like dying, a very familiar sensation, like my life blood pumping out through cut wrists. Suddenly humiliated, and incapable of any response, I withdrew from the discussion, retreating as I have done in unhappy circumstances, into myself. When I picked this fight, I knew the risks I was taking, but I had not counted on losing so quickly, and so profoundly to a time honored courtroom tactic. If the law is on your side, argue the law. If the facts are on your side, argue the facts. If neither is on your side, attack the person. I sat there wondering what perverse,

self destructive instincts had brought me to this end, what misjudgment had ever convinced me that law school could be a new beginning for me.

Lack of sleep began to catch up with me. I felt as if the battle had been taken out of my hands. It wasn't my fight any more. My mind kept turning back to our flick, perhaps because erotic fantasy was suddenly more important to me than this debate, or perhaps because something in the past was trying to force itself into the present because it contained a message, a story trying to tell me something.

John put his hand on my shoulder, I think he intended to shake me out of drowsiness. But instead, his touch put me deeper into a dream. His touch reminded me of Jay. It might just as well have been Jay sitting at my side, speaking to me in his voice. I began to hallucinate, as if I were experiencing a total breakdown, or an acid flashback. Instead of my notes on obscenity law, I found spread out before me the pages of my latest entries into our Flick.

"What should you do when find Truth? Leave it where it lies?"

Holmes said, as he looked over my shoulder. "Too heavy handed a symbol."

"But it was real. Not a symbol. That's what we found in Lovehollow."

"But it doesn't fit."

I said to Holmes, "I know it sounds pompous as hell and overly didactic, but it was the truth. At least I think so. I used to get like that, pompous as hell and overly didactic when drugs suppressed my inhibitions. Even my hallucinations were pompous and didactic. It is part of a message. Maybe it was true and maybe

it wasn't. Maybe it means something and maybe it doesn't."

"What you just said doesn't mean anything."

Then I shrugged, "Even meaningless things mean something."

"Phoenix playing with ashes...?"

"Fuck you."

I was roused from my daydream, and the meaning of it had become clear to me, too clear. Then I spoke aloud, to Galen Weiss. "Don't you see the irony of the Miller test? It is an artistic crime to place your ideas in plain sight. It is a criminal crime to hide them."

"Ms. McCullah, do you know the Jewish interpretation of the Tower of Babel?"

"I'm not Jewish."

"The sin was not in trying to reach Heaven. The sin was that the builders got so caught up in their enterprise, it overshadowed their values. When a brick fell, the builders of Babel wept-- but when a human being fell, no one looked up. That is what you are doing, looking at a principle and not taking into account the toll that principle exacts on those caught in its operation."

By this time Karen Wilson had returned. Professor Weiss opened the book Karen had brought.

"I feel compelled to read this to you, since this discussion has gotten so far out of hand. It speaks for itself, really. I will only tell you that it is part of a suicide note, written by a woman who called herself Jayne Payne." As Galen Weiss began to read, another transformation took place. A long repressed suffering bubbled to the surface of my professor's face.

"Never liked it, never, fooled you all... well maybe liked it long ago, or thought would like it-- someone I used to know, liked

men... all the well hung men, not thinking about hanged men, like now, necks in a noose, their bones popping squirt juice cause their spinal cords have snapped. That's what I think a well hung man is now." Galen Weiss lost herself in this role; every trace of confidence and assertiveness disappearing, "I came for the rainbows, came for the neon spotlight, came for the glamour, the dope, came for the camera, but never came, not really. Didn't come for the cum. No idea would be so bad. A good excuse to get high; like maybe I could get so stoned, I'd just sleep through it like an operation, never even feel the dicks no matter how many; the 3 dicks going in me at once; the 10 dicks sometimes don't ask me where they all fit. But sometimes I'd wake up, and I'd *know*."

Her voice cracked over the rambling words. Throughout the class, the murmurs, the banter, the whispered comments ceased. A *séance* hush prevailed. "I'd know I wasn't dreaming with this shower of hot cum slapping me in the face, from 10 dicks when I'd be suddenly awake, and I'd see, see what they'd be doing to me. And the camera and the lights in my face, the damn camera watching me, trying to climb inside of me, trying to see what is going on inside of me. Nightmare of hairy dog dicks up my pussy, squirting dogshit."

The class was in shock, I think. Not just over the crude language which no one ever expected to hear from Galen Weiss, but also at the bald persuasiveness of her performance, this tincture of human suffering, this exhibitionism of pain.

"... time they shoved a knife up my pussy and filmed it, and Curtis Fucking Ensor screamed you like it bitch; if you don't like it, it'll cut you-- if you don't keep wet you'll bleed like your worst period...heh heh heh, his laugh, and he said nothing lubes the ladies like scaring the shit out of them. Like the time they dragged

out the damn dog and I shit right there on the bed, and they left me chained in my shit in the bed and out comes Hormone Whoremoean which he says is pronounced the German way as Herman Warmachine and he's got these little balls from shooting steroids and the rest of him looks like a great big dick and patched together regions of high blood pressure, veins bursting out everywhere and hair and a big fucking dick and little balls, cute little balls, like something to hang on a charm bracelet, and he sees the shit smeared everywhere and he says to Curtis Fucking Ensor will you clean her up for christsakes and Curtis Fucking Ensor says heheheh-- nothing lubes the ladies like humiliation..."

You should have warned me about this particular piece of writing. I had not expected it to affect me so violently, Die. Galen Weiss seemed to have vanished, possessed by the wandering, unmollified demon of a dead martyr to exploitation. It was as if she were reading a Ouija intelligence rather than a book titled after a quote from Chief Justice Burger paraphrasing Richard Nixon.

"And the camera zooms in and Hormone is on top of me crushing dead stupid meat weight obeying Curtis Ensor, the good player and his coach, and the camera to catch it all. It wasn't humiliation that lubed the lady, it was the shit itself, dick and shit inside me, his dick all shit smeared."

For the first time I began to wonder about the tragedies I was aiding and abetting with my script. The Flick. The Fuck. Whose destiny would I alter? What woman would be conscripted into the tragedy of my own past, which I survived despite my best efforts to the contrary. I began to feel the enormity of my sins pressing in on me; the arrogance, the selfishness, the gross indulgence of this vicarious baring of my life. To whom was I delegating my capacity for failure? A bolus of emotion rose up through my throat, a

thick, congealed pepper broth of weeping. I swallowed it down. I will not cry, I thought. I will not. My eyes will not water despite the spice flame kindling in my sinuses. I will not, I demanded of myself.

"Nothing lubes the ladies like humiliation, God damn Curtis fucking Asshole Hemorrhoid Ensor. When he joins me in Hell, I wish I will be near enough to watch the tortures they give him, but it won't happen because then it wouldn't be hell for me. The only thing that scares me about dying is that they'll write 'The little Tramp' on my headstone, and every man who walks by will think that I'm easy stuff and dig up my rotting corpse and fuck the mush of my leftover pussy and think the puss and death grease there is cause I'm wet for him and I like it cause I'm the Little Tramp. And that's what's going to happen to me anyway 'cause my body is cut to parts, ass, tits, pussy, over millions of frames of film. Me, fucked forever, trapped on film for fucking ever, with no escape."

Silence.

I looked down at my vague and hazy reflection on the desk surface. All of my rhetoric about art seemed spent of its ammunition.

"She was my sister," said Galen Weiss.

You could feel the shock and disbelief spreading, the awkward, undiluted embarrassment, as if she had bared a mastectomy scar. Then she paused for dramatic effect, banishing from her face any sign of personal pain, signaling an ambiguity, and letting it penetrate. She added, "Not my biological sister, but my sister none the less."

The class let out a collective sigh. The emotional cymbal had crashed, followed by catharsis.

And then I felt furious and betrayed at having been so slickly

manipulated. Shaking, I mustered up the courage to ask, "What would protect you from prosecution for reading that?"

Without hesitation, she responded, "Jenkins v. Georgia."

I felt light headed, emotionally friable, sleep deprived, and mad.

I began to cry, right there, in front of everyone. Not just a tender trickle of tears, not a controlled sobbing, but a great rush of weakness, with heaving shoulders, gritted teeth and bitten lips, my otherwise pale face a deep red, a prisoner of mucus cords that veiled my face and tied my hands upright in the air, unable to touch anything. Crying for Jayne Payne and Jay Fortunata, and you, and for Galen Weiss, for whatever suffering she felt and exploited. But mostly crying for myself, and for the way I had so thoroughly lost this fight, and for my blind misjudgment that had led me to pick the wrong side.

John Holmes, bless him, stood up beside me, reaching into his pocket. Professor Weiss stared at him, mystified. John took out his wallet, brought it halfway to his mouth, then flipped it open. Speaking into his exposed credit card niches, he said, "Mr. Sulu, we've got trouble down here. Beam us up immediately!"

Mercifully, the class bell rang.

Galen Weiss turned to me and said, "You understand this wasn't personal."

"The hell it wasn't," I said.

"This is part of being a lawyer, Ms. McCullah. Perhaps tears worked as a good defense in other situations. They do not work in the courtroom."

"Why Die Smiling?" I asked, "Why not Mario Kundalini, or Iream Insider, or Randy Spears, or John Dough, or Curtis Ensor himself? Why Die Smiling?"

"It is the only name I know." She reached into her briefcase

and pulled out an issue of Femillennium, the very one I had found in the Laundromat. As it turned out, she had written an adjacent article about abortion protests and counter-protests.

Throughout midterm week, no less than four of my constitutional law class mates solicited my attentions-- ranging in subtlety from Burton Wallace's polite invitation to study together to Gary Strock's "wanna' fuck?" Two upper classmen asked for dates, in addition to a professor who teaches Legal Ethics. Word of my anti-censorship views has spread throughout the school and a scarlet W has been hung upon my breast. I have suffered a terrible loss of anonymity and personal mystery that makes law school entirely unbearable.

My grades have continued their downward spiral.

Thank God Christmas is not far off.

Perhaps my spectacle of weeping in front of my constitutional law class is a sign that I have made yet another bad choice. I pray to God for direction, and he answers in silence. I alone must chose, without the benefit of auguries, and that is a gift.

I drove cross country alone, without sleep, racing to get home in time for Thanksgiving. It reminded me of the trips Jay and I used to make from Princeton to California this time of year.

Somewhere outside Baton Rouge, I found myself approaching a huge tunnel. Its walls writhed with street gang graffiti, multi-colored knots of spray painted gorgon hair. One image dominated the others: a huge blood red penis, at least twenty feet long; crudely rendered, fringed in drips-- its angry head pointing to the tunnel entrance like an obscene directional sign. And underneath it, a white skull, and the words, "Die Smiling." A news broadcast last night flashed the same words, written across the cannon of a U.S. Army tank stationed in Saudi Arabia.

I hadn't realized how deeply you've penetrated the universal

subconscious.

I miss you, despite everything. But you knew that all along, didn't you?

I am naked on my old bed, lying in front of my grandmother's mirror which I had dragged across the length of America. This antique, which I had hoped would give me a sense of continuity of self, has become bug fodder.

The purple trails on my left arm look like creeping vines preserved between the pages of a book. They remind me of your last touch.

My legs are wide open. I am looking into my sex in the mirror, this ugly, ragged, raw thing, this molten toothless, hungry mouth, surrounded by ringlets of auburn and flame. I am trying to see my body through your eyes. I am trying to imagine why this part of me provokes such desire in you.

Is this the mystery of sex? The tug of discordant emotions; the objective repulsiveness of body parts and the instinct that forces us to connect in spite of disgust. Our romance has been so compelling for much the same reasons. I see and understand how loathsome you are, and yet I can not resist you.

I keep saying no to you, but I keep writing anyway. It was a no that is really a yes. When you threaten me, you ruin the game. I must not be coerced into participation. This is, after all, my story too, and you can not use it as a weapon against me. I already created this story once, by living it. Nothing you can do to me between these sheets is worse than what I have done to myself, willingly.

No. I will not finish the script for you.

There will be no script to send with this letter. I can't do it anymore. I can't write you into bed with another woman and pretend that I am she.

If you surmise that a test is in progress, you are correct. But you are not the one being tested. I fully appreciated the risks involved in dealing with you. I find myself in troubled circumstances; stoked in ways I had not anticipated; too many embers of what you had set aflame are still inside me, still smoldering. What choices are open to me?

I feel the way I did that night in Hightstown, an antique straight razor in one hand, watching the beat of my pulse, thinking about all the futures that might be. My scars now obscure the tracery of life that once was so visible. All the unfulfilled potential haunted me, and will haunt me the rest of my life, like the child we aborted. I sit debating whether I would, with a pen stroke, curettage her unconceived siblings.

Though I should be the one negotiating terms of surrender, I am delivering an ultimatum. I sense you are especially vulnerable to me, right now, despite your Swan.

As John Holmes said, there is a way you can have me back. You must change into someone else.

How much faith do you have in me? Are you willing to let me change you into someone else? Would you believe whatever I ask you to believe, no matter how ridiculous? Would you let me unglue the atoms of your brain with my tale? Would you plunge into depths of absurdity and terror so profoundly disorienting that you laugh and tremble at the same time, and you think you have gone mad? Would you place yourself at the mercy of whatever lies I choose to tell, even if it leaves you dazed and wondering whether altered consciousness has been wrought by a drug slipped into your wine, or the by the chemical changes of your brain decomposing?

Are you willing to accept love as your only reality? Are you willing to worship according to my dictates? Are you willing to let me destroy you?

Love,

Phoenix

Letter XXXI

December 27, 1990

Dear Phoenix,

So now you know something about Jayne Payne? What you don't know is that the story carries a curse. It has touched you. Her story of a rite of passage. Jizz Biz insiders know that her name is to be used among insiders only. Otherwise, it brings bad luck. It is an initiation rite, like the initiation rites you told me that law students go through, only this is what's rite for what I'm up to. The part about bad luck and superstition is part of the rite. I'll lay it on you.

The time has come for you to be among the initiated.

In a Playboy interview in 1973, Curtis Ensor made the mistake of referring to "A harmless bonding ceremony meant to ensure a lifetime of friendship... something on the order of fraternity hazing." For a time, when anti-porn feminists and right wing politicians wanted to play up the evilness of the industry, they would run the Ensor comment in tandem with the first hand account of those rituals taken from Jayne Payne's suicide note, written three years later.

And so for a time, Jayne Payne, one of our own, belonged to the Feminists and right wing politicians. Like she was their personal property. A martyr of exploitation. A porno Joan of Arc. Burned at the stake.

But the industry found a way to appropriate her back. Mostly through predatory use of copyright and trademark laws. The industry made it impossible to tap any info at all about Jayne

Payne. We wiped her out of the memory of man. We are the keepers of her story. It is for us alone. We have her ashes, too.

Your teacher read from a rare book. Some porno collectors might pay a lot for it.

Jayne was one of the industry's high profile tragedies. Hers was hardly an isolated case. Starlets flame out all the time in this business. Not so many with Jayne's panache. She had huge, waif eyes that seemed wet all the time. But she would never be caught crying. She hated the industry. Hated fucking for the cameras. Her old films look like acts of martyrdom. And yet, she made a great show of accepting her fate. She posed as someone with enough inner strength to shoulder any sorrow. Blessed with a victim's charm. You couldn't help but love her.

She specialized in bittersweet comedies. Maybe they hadn't been written to be bittersweet, but that was the way they played after she got a hold of them. Her doleful, deadpan delivery set a different slant on otherwise crude jokes. The critics likened her to Chaplin. They called her the Little Tramp. She died in 1976. The stories I've heard from the people who knew her could break your heart. I genuinely repent of all the times I ogled her pictures when I was in high school.

Jayne experimented with every drug on the controlled substances list. In deference to her upper class roots, she cultivated a snobbish appetite for very expensive dope, which she consumed in very expensive quantities. Her friends think she wanted to waste herself. At least to the point where men would no longer be turned on by the way she inspired pity.

Pregnant, with no way to prove paternity, apart from proof on film of 27 contenders, broke in more than one sense of the word, going through withdrawal rather than risking the depletion of a stash she knew was large enough to be fatal, Jayne spent the

last four days of her life writing a confession about her career.

The short version runs like this: On Jayne's first day on the set, the director chained her splay legged to a bed and told her to wait for her co-star. So she waited. An hour went by. She started to wonder if the crew went off and got high somewhere and forgot about her. This was, after all, not the most reliable crowd.

She was wondering. Starting to get worried. A full grown Great Dane ambled onto the set. Jayne screamed, suddenly afraid that her co-star was the dog. She had been warned of such kink. The animal started sniffing her. Licking her thighs, as he had been trained to do.

She struggled to get free of the chains. The dog jumped up on the bed, happily wagging a huge doggie bone. The whole crew was watched from a distance. Snickering.

Jayne went completely out of her mind with terror, thinking that the dog was actually going to fuck her. At the last minute, a rescue was staged. Her real co-star stormed onto the scene. Armed only with his bare fists and a pointy weapon. He seemed very brave. A naked knight against a dragon.

After this set-up, Jayne was more than happy to do her first scene. Anything was better than being fucked by the damn dog, and the rescue added a touch of romance.

For the most part, these rituals are gone -- though I've heard rumors they persist in some of the darker regions of the industry, of which there are many. For the most part, the ritual has been replaced by the story of the ritual, which is a ritual in its telling.

So now you have been initiated.

Like it or not, you are one of us.

It is like the commitment you were always looking for.

There's a way for you and me to be together without destroying The Flick. We have to act quick. Time grows short. I

tried to call your parents to get your new phone number. They saw through my disguised voice. They hung up. So call me. I need to talk to you. Time is of the essence. As you lawyers say.

You haven't really changed. Everything you do is elegant. Purposeful. Veers toward disaster.

You hit me with a maybe. A calculated ambiguity. A tactic. Like the three years we didn't talk to each other. Sort of a test. This is not the first time you've pulled the old come back to me routine. With the tears and the helplessness act. I fell for it many times. I'm falling for it again.

Can I change into someone else? Would I let you destroy me? Fuck, no. I'm not into domination. You are not into submissive men.

You and me always figured we were temporary. We kept stalling. Dragging out the temporariness. So what does it take for you to call it that great, once-in-a-lifetime-love that enjoys such a fine reputation (though I'll be damned if I ever knew anyone who ever made it work)? Is it a function of seasoning? You find it when you reach the season in your life when too much of a good thing has worn you out. You meet someone not totally awful. Not bad looking either. You just plop down. Like when you're dog-tired at the end of the day. The television is on. Doesn't matter what's playing. It becomes a routine.

Or are there special combinations? Powerful. Crazy. Irresistible. Magic. You can't let go. No choice in the matter. You're stuck. Like characters caught in a formula romance.

You want me to get religion? Be a lawyer's husband? Give up making porno movies? *Behave?* Like, stop looking down dresses? Not tell dirty jokes at the Bar Association cocktails and church socials?

If I let you push me around that much, you would hate me.

I think you would like me better if I am myself.

And you should be yourself, too.

There are many different women who could make me happy. By being many and being different. There is only one who could be the only one.

If you haven't figured it out, that's a proposal. The one I never got around to making that night in Hightstown. I should be more explicit. Will you marry me, Phoenix?

Think what it would be like to hold each other again. After so long. It would be like the first time all over again. We could preserve our love. *We could film it.* When we get back together, we can turn it into our first time. Would you be ashamed to show the world what we do to each other?

This is NOT what I was up to all along. Really, it is not. I had something else in mind. But this... this has that kind of inevitable feel to it. Like what we should do. How we should end.

All you have to do is be yourself. You can take Swan's place the way she would take yours. You don't have it in you right now. But you have that potential. Do you want to have it in you?

I hate to do this to you. I truly do. It must be done. I have to play the Swan card so that you understand how little time is left, and how high the ante has been raised. If you will forgive the poker metaphor. I have to lay this card on the table. My strong points are not what you would call tactfulness. Or being responsible. Or being considerate. What I am missing in the way of tact, responsibility, and consideration, I try to make up with being frank. My sense is that right now you are as much motivated by jealousy as you are by lust or nostalgia or romance or altruism, or what ever it is that motivates you every time we try to get back together. You probably don't realize how horny you used to get every time you caught another woman flirting with me. You could

never figure out what you wanted to do to my wandering eyes afterward. Claw them out. Or fuck them out. So bringing up Swan might hurt my cause. Or help it.

I figure if one side or the other has to be destroyed in order to make a romance work, it should be the female side. That has been history. But I am tired of destroying women. I am especially tired of destroying you. How about if I promise never to destroy you again? Let that be our compromise. Don't ask me to be the girl.

Now, Swan trusts me enough to let me destroy her.

In one week, Swan and I are bound for the Bram Stroker Award Ceremony. This will be our first public appearance together. Many photographers will be present. From that point on, her life will change. Lovely as she is, she will never sell another bar of facial soap. Nor lingerie. Nor jewelry. Not even douches. Not even toilet paper. If she makes that kind of sacrifice for me, I won't leave her for anything. Not even for you. Maybe I'm getting a conscience at this late stage in my life. Or maybe I am really in love. I will not destroy her.

One week, that's all we have. Up to that point, there's no permanent damage. Swan has broken lots of hearts. So have I. Until the end of the week, it is just another romance. An ordinary romance. Any ordinary romance can crash. Until the end of the week, it is no big deal if this is just another love that died. After the week's end, I am hers. Forever.

You and I know. Down deep. As deep as we both go. We belong together. We fight it. We flirt around it. We try to deny it. But it is there in our souls. Like a brand. We tried to escape it. We tried not talking to each other for three full years, and that didn't work. We can't escape belonging to each other. But if Swan does this thing for me, you will lose me, Phoenix. Really lose me.

Really, really, for true and real forever lose me. And it will not be like the night you got engaged to Bill West and I got engaged to June Whateverhername was for spite, and I came back to our place to get my stuff and ended up stuffing you instead. This will be it, the butt, the cessation, the stop, the crown, the finis, the termination, conclusion, bottom, finale, the wind-up, the boundary, the limit, the posterior, the tail, the consummation. The climax. The end. The last of Die and Phoenix.

The Swan song.

I can't change for you. I can't be someone else. I have to be myself.

Are you willing to be yourself?

Love,

Die.

Letter XXXII

February 10, 1991

Dear Phoenix,

I waited for an answer. Day after day. The last day came. The box, empty. The end. So the need for secrecy is gone. Swan, as you may know by now, is Alice Haviland, born Alice Swanson. I still call her Swan. The name stuck.

The last day, when I knew for certain you weren't going to answer me, when I knew there would be no word, no nothing from you, Swan and me went walking through Central Park.

We passed an old couple huddled on the porch together, wrapped in a blanket. They both had tumors on their necks. The man hugged the woman tightly, and said to her, "Look, there it goes again."

"Such beautiful colors," she said.

"Just like clockwork."

"There it goes again."

Swan leaned over. "What do you see?" she asked.

"The wonders of science." They didn't seem to care who they were talking to.

"It is happening again." The old woman seemed happy.

"Now there is a couple that works for what they have," said Swan.

"Doesn't look like work to me."

"Just like clockwork."

"The colors."

Swan said, "You think it is easy to share the same hallucination? Or maybe she is the only one hallucinating and he's

playing her along so she won't feel alone. Or maybe there is nothing going on, and neither one of them remembers how the stuff about the colors started but they keep at it, each one, for the other's sake."

"You're upset."

"I get scared sometimes when I think of all the bad things that happen from love. I thought it was fun for awhile to be Phoenix in your life, but I don't want a repeat of what happened between you two. It pissed me off that she would write to you the way she did. Drop everything and come back. All is forgiven, maybe. She thinks you belong to her, Die. Love takes effort. You have to burn calories to keep it going."

I thought about the empty mail box. The slot unpenetrated.

"You're right. Phoenix and I are totally burnt out."

"The way you've been finished so many times before?"

"Finisheder. Burnt to a crisp. Carbonized. Ashes."

"So I shouldn't worry just because her name is Phoenix?"

I laughed. Nervously.

"Die, in the past I've tried to coast with my men. You know what it is like. You think there's enough energy from what people call chemistry, and it lets you coast for awhile. But then you crash into something and you get totaled and it surprises you things could get so bad and you can't figure out why you crashed, or what went wrong. All you know is you got a mess, and pain."

"That's what happened to Phoenix and I. The chemistry kept churning. We kept coasting. We kept crashing."

"There are times when I feel I am following the track of her fingertips down your spine. I can almost taste her kisses in your mouth. It doesn't make me jealous. I find it exciting in its own way."

"I don't understand this thing between you and Phoenix. Do

you think it turns me on? It doesn't. I just think it's weird."

"I like the way that woman devastates men. Leaves them staring bug-eyed and wondering. You know, I got where I am by copying success. I steal any successful strategy I can find."

"The wonders of science..." said the old woman.

Swan continued, "I used to be a loser, a complete loser, before I became a copycat. I would rather be a winner than me. I don't let a silly thing like ego get in my way. I don't mind being Phoenix. I have many other people inside me, too."

"Just so long as I'm the only male."

You can't argue with Swan once she gets fixed on an idea. She sticks to it, and lets it mutate beyond comprehension. The words just flow. They sound authoritative, the way she says them. It was obvious from her tone of voice and lack of cigarettes, she wasn't trying to be you, just then. She was drawing from some other soul in her repertoire of winners. And it worked on me. For some reason, I like her best when I can't figure her out.

I said, "Are you willing to take me as just me?"

"Such beautiful colors," said the old man.

Swan said, "I don't want us to end up like you and Phoenix. This time I want to do the work, burn the calories, keep it together. Why the hell else do you think I am going to make a fuck movie for you? Why else would I trash every possible future I might have except the one with you?"

Across the street, the traffic light changed from red to green.

"All those pretty colors."

We were free to cross, and it was time to get out of there.

"Just like clockwork."

"The wonders of science."

February 21, 1991

We drove to Miami. Swan's Rubicon. The Bram Stroker Award Ceremony takes place on a cruise ship chartered by a coalition of the larger studios. The ship was running behind. Swan and I were running behind. I might be entitled to certain prerogatives. Having been nominated in three categories: best director, best actor, and best screenplay. But they wouldn't hold up the ship for me.

We made it. It cost me five speeding tickets in three different states. The damn radar detector wasn't much help. It gave me a two minute warning every time I was caught. I put too much faith in the product because I liked the name. Fuzz Nailer.

At the port, we parked the car in a garage built for the Minotaur. The distance to the docks and the shortness in the time would have challenged even the marathoners who flunked their piss tests at the Olympics. Still the decision was made (not by me) to abandon no luggage. We ran--raced-- under handicap, weighted down by immense trolleys of connected suitcases. Chariots of fashion. By the time we reached the gangplank, our clothes were soaked with sweat. Our faces were flushed with exhaustion. We looked like we had rolled to our destination while fucking.

An explosion of flashbulbs greeted us. My vision cleared. I saw the crowd gawking. Unusual for this crowd. The presence of cameras worked a transformation on Swan. The ruddiness vanished from her cheeks. Except for a modest blush. Her heart was that much under control.

She crossed the gangplank. And it was all over. No turning back. For either us. Even if it turned out to be a totally bonehead idea. Swan put on her best modeling sashay. She was hot. Every well heeled step ignited the bridge behind her.

The stars had come. Old timers like Bull Prod, Slow Poke and August Scepter; young punks like Art Taboo and Lucky Stiff. Fledgling chicks, like Pavlova Drool, Rose Hips, Innocence End, and Tuft Stuft. They were coming on the promenade. And promenading on the come. Companions clogged the companionways. Priapos Matador paraded around in animal skins, teeth and claws, and a loin cloth stitched together from severed bull's ears. Vynal (her full name) had on a bikini made of candy. Or at least what was left of it. Starting to melt and run down her abdomen in thick purple syrupy streams. Her nipples poked out of bite shaped crescents.

Redtail Swallow's costume dazzled. A chain mail mesh made of zircons and peek holes.

The crowd got over the shock of finding royalty slumming in their midst. There was a mad rush to embrace Swan. A lot of kisses flew in her direction. Like a hail of suction-cup arrows. Crude hugs followed. Unwelcomed hip thrusts. Butt bumps. Her face was quickly smeared with a rainbow assortment of lip prints. A wedding reception gauntlet formed to kiss her crotch. She had the bushwhacked smile of disappointment. The queen of the flying trapeze being welcomed to the society of side show freaks. Goomba-gamba, Goomba-gamba, we will make her one of us.

Swan seemed determined to maintain her composure. What a champion. But it was like she had stumbled into a society ball (an apt description of this group) only to find a turd floating in the punchbowl. What to do now? Complain to the hostess? Ignore it? Leave the chore of telling to someone else? Or say: Ah what a lovely turd! And take a drink. Swan manufactured one of her finest accessory smiles, smile number 476. The turd in the punchbowl smile.

"Back off," I yelled. I started shoving people aside to clear a

path. Hurt expressions greeted me, as if I had betrayed my own kind.

Sea gulls wheeled over our heads. Dropped little surprises into the crowd.

Swan was looking at me in a different light. Frightened of the world she was now part of.

I said, "When I was a kid, me and Jay Fortunata used to take a fishing pole and catch gulls with it. We'd put a bit of fish on the end of a hook, then toss it into the sky. The gulls would scream, and we would fly them like kites."

"I hated boys who did that. I used to have a blouse with gulls on it. They were my friends. They covered my breasts." She stared at the sea gulls following us out to sea.

Eerie Canal joined us on deck. She looked Swan up and down. Then, like she had a sudden flash of psychic insight, Eerie offered, "The lady needs a drink."

We pushed through the crowd, trying to locate the bar. The Florida air smelled like fruit: sweet and bitter oranges, lemons, and pomegranates. Maybe it was all the cheap perfume and suntan oil.

Not far from the casino, we found a fortune telling scale decorated in a tarot card motif. It raised questions about dreams. On the Star card in gaudy letters: "What is your Weight? What is your Fortune? No Springs."

I stood on it. Turned the knob. Looked for the right question. They didn't have "I still dream of sky colored kisses I will never taste again." They didn't have "I dream of lost love." So I settled for the closest thing I could find, then I deposited a quarter.

The answer was "good for farmers, bad for city dwellers."

I dreamed of manure.

I had another quarter so I let Swan spin the knob this time.

She picked "I dreamed of a mad dog and got a proposal." This time the quarter stuck.

Eventually, we reached a place below decks called "de Basement Bar." We took our seats before someone else grabbed them.

"I will return with drinks," said Eerie.

Off in one dark corner, a pin-ball machine was being pressed and poked. Even though it was out of order. Major Exploration, Slit Vicious, and Grace Underfire were doing a threesome on top of embossed reproductions of 1950's romance comic books. Flesh tones done in pink dots. A Woman who wore horn rimmed glasses, a tear trickling down her cheek. Smiling studs in swim trunks. Thought balloons bursting with words about lost love and blown opportunity. The eternal regret of being stuck with the wrong partner. Betrayals of friendship. Swaps. The same old stories. Part of the glass topping had broken off, making it possible to insert a rod that would block the silver balls from going into the hole. Major worked the rod like an extra flipper. Slit jumped up and down as she scored. The numbers just kept rolling.

"Are you sorry you did this?" I asked Swan.

"Why should I be? There is no undoing it." She had the hard look of a woman determined not to cry. I began to worry. Only recently, and for big bucks, had she picked up her veneer of self-control. How long before it melted like make-up under the lights?

Once we got out past the three mile limit, the genitals came out on display.

Swan drifted off into a private reverie. Radiating depression. I made some feeble attempts to engage her in conversation. I got nowhere. I got smile number 476.

More attempts at conversation. I hit a dead channel.
I decided to let it all hang out.

Swan kept her dress on, the only dress in the room. Like modesty made any difference to 'The Press. Where ever she goes, camera shutters quiver.

After awhile Eerie Canal reappeared with three Screwdrivers.
"I'm allergic to oranges," said Swan.

"I will get a replacement," I said.

"Screwdrivers are what's being passed out."

So I wandered over to the bar on my own. When confronted with situations awful, seek anesthesia. Over the bar, ceiling fans turned languidly. Loose scraps of paper blew around, phone numbers written on half of them. A woman smiled at me. Another stranger. She had a deep all over tan. Hair bleached as old bones. Her pubic hair looked sun fried and brittle. She sipped a perspiring drink. Made hushed comments to a guy wearing a cobra hood ornament over his erection. Everyone had a gimmick.

A lithe brunette named Slipperi Slope was wearing nothing but a pair of glittering ruby high heels. The shoes looked like she plucked them off a dead hooker a house landed on. Her precisely shaped lips were smeared with a red pigment pounded from a sea clam.

"Buy me a drink," she said to me.

"You start out on the left foot."

"They're free," she said. She flagged down one of the bartenders. It wasn't like she was ordering a drink, it was more like she was doing him a favor.

"Can I suck you off?" she said to me, very professionally.

"They're both left feet."

"The mouth says no. But something else is saying yes."

She started to bend down as I was rising up.

"No." I said.

"There's a couple of films being shot right now. I thought you would want to be in them. One is a documentary about the awards ceremony. The other is a horror film based on something by Edgar Allen Poe. We're calling it Masque of the Dread Breath. It's like, an AIDS commentary, or something." Wolfgang Bang was hanging out not far from where we stood. A camera cranking in his hand. A whole fucking film crew behind him.

"Aw, for shit's sake..." I said.

"I think it would really boost my career if I could suck your cock."

I turned to the bartender. "Two vodka martinis, please."

"We're only serving Screwdrivers."

"What the fuck kind of bar is this?"

"Free."

"All right. A Screwdriver."

Sliperi started going down on me while I was waiting for the drink. She caught me off guard, while I wasn't looking. I immediately dumped my drink in a long stripe that ran from her ass to the top of her head. She looked up laughing, licking her lips. Screwdriver dribbled out of her dark hair and rained in orange drops on her surgically perfect breasts.

I looked around for Swan. She had gone, and I hoped she hadn't gone in a huff. I headed for the stateroom, ready to explain.

As the sun went down, the sky turned a somber purple. The breeze turned cold. Out in the passageway, I jangled my keys, in the moonlight. Chose the one that glinted blue. Shoved it into the lock. I twisted. The key jammed. Out of a habit I could never break, I had reached for the key to the apartment you and I used to share in Hightstown.

I worked the old key loose. Pitched it like a sacrifice into a

golden ashtray screwed on the wall. It clunked around in the kissed butts and dying embers. Made noises like a heart ripped out and slowly coming to the end of its beating.

I found Swan inside, doing Tai-chi exercises in the nude. She moved stiffer than usual. Seemed distracted. She kept staring through the porthole, out to sea. I wondered if she was thinking about taking a swim. More method acting? Just what I needed. Swan playing Phoenix trying to kill herself again. A cigarette dangled from her lips, dancing in the grip of the antigravity phenomena that controls her breasts. I watched the smoke rise to about six inches from the ceiling, where it made a 90 degree turn and eased toward me.

I tried another feeble attempt at conversation. I couldn't tell whether or not she had seen me and Slipperi. Then I finally decided she hadn't. I hope that footage is never used. Or that Swan never sees any of the six or seven films it could end up in.

Having flunked conversation, we tried shaking the sheets. We flunked that too. I wondered if they were still serving free drinks in de Basement Bar. And if they weren't, whether I could lick my last one off Slipperi Slope.

But I didn't go anywhere until the time for the ceremony had rolled around. I pulled out my costume, a fifteen hundred dollar tux. With the crotch cut away. I put it on for the third time in my life. Felt like an asshole. Thoroughly depressed. I wasn't sure whether it would be worse to win, or to fail to win, any of the 3 Bram Stokers I was up for.

"I'm not going," said Swan.

"Why not?"

"Nothing to wear."

"Wear nothing."

She got up, went over to the sink and turned the water on.

Then, with slow, deliberate, 1st year intern like movements, began washing her hands. She ran the tip of long, straight, fingers back and forth. She rinsed, wiped the water off with a paper towel. Changed her mind. Turned the water back on and washed again.

"Cut it out, they're clean."

She left the water running. "I once turned down a cool million to do nudes for one of the high quality glossies. I'm not about to give it away to the rag sleazies."

"I need to go."

"Go alone."

I left her. Outside the stateroom, a parade of lovers beckoned for me to follow them. They chased a distant light. You could tell they were lovers because the men all had their dicks up the women's asses. Somehow they had learned to walk while butt-fucking. Mastering a kind of coordination usually reserved for Siamese twins. They trundled down the corridor like a stampede of crabs. I felt an ache. Like a thumbprint of pain in the middle of my chest. It was an old feeling. Left over from a different time.

On the third deck, a series of twisted, interconnecting suites led to the grand Ballroom, where the ceremony was about to begin.

The first suite was blue with blue windows.

The second, purple.

A show was in progress. You couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. Pisa Behind, Sunset Stripp and Decent Maelstrom pitched the usual lines to the boys from the skin mags. They put on this jive: "I love cock... I have to have at least ten orgasms a day... My problem is I love to swallow sperm but I'm on a diet..." But the truth of the matter is, when these three hit the set, they're all so dry and clamped down, I always wonder if I'm knocking on the right hole.

By the time I hit the third chamber, the green chamber, I had the sense that something was not right.

The next chamber was bright, very bright. The hue was garish enough to give Swan hives. The passages, with their progressions of colors, seemed very familiar to me. Like something I'd seen in a dream. A sense of Deja Vu tingled up my spine. I knew this place. I had been here many times before. I couldn't figure out when.

The fifth chamber was white.

Fountana Velour had greased up with some venomous smelling suntan oil. She had draped herself in spider web netting. It would leave one hell of a tan mark for her next movie. Vlad "The Impaler" Dracula had a make-up man cover him with artificial wounds. Nasty looking. But edible. He is also known as the bat-man for reasons having nothing to do with flying nocturnal mammals. Faithful Not was contemplating a dildo the size of a bathysphere. The babe known only as Medusa wore nothing but her trademark ass-length mane. A snake-pit of braids. Each braid dyed a different day-glow color.

The sixth chamber was violet. Here, I ran into Eerie Canal. She had spent a fortune on her costume. A diaphanous, ruffled affair. Hung with jeweled totems and icons. She had been nominated for the best actress award for her performance in a film called Asstral Projection.

"You're dressed like a winner," I said. Gave her the up thumb.

"I don't expect to win," she said, her voice a little cracked. And that's when I saw the change that had come over her in the last hour. Like putting on the dress had broken something inside her. The whites of her eyes were pink as a centerfold spread.

"What happened to the usual positive attitude?"

She started to weep. "I am positive."

I put my arms around her. Gave her the warmest hug I could manage. It was meant to tell her that she is not a pariah. That she is still loved. These hugs have become a ritual following news of infection. The porno equivalent of the mafia kiss.

"Don't worry about me, Die. It is still in the dormant phase. The median dormant phase is 15 years for normal people. I figure, what with my mind control and perfect fitness, I am strong enough to keep it dormant forever. This isn't a death sentence for me. No way. I wouldn't even have gotten infected if not for the new force in my life, this enemy from beyond, this ghost you asked me to fight for you."

"Eerie, sweetheart, you have had more lovers than anyone I've ever known, and I have known many people with many lovers. And you got this attitude, like nothing can hurt you but green kryptonite. It is just plain silly to blame my dead ex-friend."

"You should have warned me about the kind of person he was."

"You don't know anything about what kind of person he was."

"But I do. Now. I was supposed to have won the award tonight, but I have been ambushed on the psychic plane. I made the mistake of ignoring messages from beyond. Messages came and I ignored them. But I learned my lesson. I used to think I could make things happen any way I wanted to, just through the power of belief. But that was wrong. I am not ignoring the messages anymore. There is no bright line between what is real and what is not real... The two are always blurring. They define each other. If you put too much faith in your senses, you get weighted down by them. But if you think you can overcome everything just through the power of belief, you fall into the hole

of your self."

She broke off at that moment. Blackness all around us. Deep onyx. We had crossed into the grand Ballroom. Its windows were trimmed with blood red. There was no light coming from any lamp or candle.

"I give you a warning. For free. You are turning your life into a pornography. A copy to take the place of the thing itself. A lot of pictures strung out in time. It never grows old. But it is not alive. Stiff. You trade away the thing itself."

Lightning flashed through the blood red windows. The seas turned rough.

The boat began to pitch. Gravity threw naked streams of people between me and Eerie.

In this suite a heavy tripod held a brazier of fire. Light streamed upon the blood tinted panes and their dark hangings. The effect was weird. Disconcerting. The crowd halted for a moment at the perimeters. Afraid to enter. I knew where I had seen the chambers before. The gigantic black clock up on the podium jogged my memory.

The black room and the black clock and the blood red windows. The great symbol of a mind trying to shut out the world and play with itself. The sealed castle lifted from Masque of the Red Death. I guess, for Wolfgang Bang's movie.

The ceremony started.

The rocking of the boat produced a weird pendulum effect on all the silicon in the room. By the time the tenth person puked, they stopped bothering with clean up.

Standing under the black clock, Treble Cleft kicked off the evening with a rousing speech. Not quite as rousing as her usual three guys at a time routine. Addressing herself to the first amendment, she made it sound like we all had a civic duty to fuck

each other on videotape. She followed with a very earnest pledge of allegiance. Mario Kundalini jerked off instead, saying, "I pledge allegiance to the cock of Mario here in America, and for all the slick patooties for which it stands... etc, etc, etc.

Rosemary Potatoes (ugh!) won best actress in a reactionary move by the Academy. I can't tell if the judges were motivated by the way she promotes mental deficit as a form of reverse snobbery, or by sheer mammary poundage.

Rosemary started to get nauseous while accepting the award. Reached for a vase full of orchids that decorated the podium. She dumped the flowers. Positioned the vase for use as an emesis basin. Then Rosemary heaved-to. The vase immediately filled. Overflowed. A confetti volcano eruption. Barf rolled out over Rosemary's clutching fingers. This continued for a while. Maybe she is pregnant again. Despite her boast that she never learned how to multiply. She left the stage with puke flecked on her here to there eyelashes.

Rosemary's acceptance speech was made less embarrassing by the fact that a great portion of the audience was likewise doing the Technicolor yawn. The stuff turned into a liquid carpet. It sloshed back and forth as the boat rocked. It smelled just fine.

Floyd Pink aced me out for best actor. The women hate him because he's a slammer. The men like him. For that reason.

Cheetah Heart got best director.

At least I got best screenplay for Mildred Pierced. Personally I thought Period Piece was more interesting. And funnier. Everyone knew it was too gross to win.

I gave an acceptance speech that owed a lot to your recent letters. I got up and faced the puking crowd. "Did you know what makes us outlaws instead of artists? It is our lack of ideas. Now, for most of this crowd, your idea of an

idea is an act that leads to conception. It doesn't matter whether your films look like it's something your neighbor did with his wife when they should have been filming the kid's birthday party, or whether it looks like an advertisement for a high cost call girl done by people who normally do MTV slots or sell perfume, champagne, cars and cigarettes. The same standards apply. You can go to jail because you have caught someone's attention and failed to give a massage. You have been altering the angle of the wrong anatomical part. You should have been bending his ear.

"I'm not suggesting that you stop the action every now and then and have someone stand up and make a speech. No one listens to speeches anymore."

Applause from those who were listening. Not many.

I continued, "It worked for Melville, but that was back in the days before the pulp magazines set a new standard for the public by promising all action and no philosophy. For those who do not know who Melville was, he wrote a famous big dick book."

Someone pitched a beer bottle at an ongoing video display. A shower of glass and moondust, which had been a great pair of boobs a moment before, fell into the puke.

I continued, "I can't recall ever saying something important while I was making a porno film. If something of some significance ever came to mind, I wouldn't say it because I knew no one would be listening. I've always just told a story the only way I know how. I do it for money and I try to figure out what will sell. Maybe they're right-- all those lawmakers who say there is no marketplace of ideas anymore, only a real market where the first amendment is just a commercial advantage when you're peddling outlaw wares.

"But contrary to our best efforts, there are ideas lurking in

our art. What kind of ideas? What is being said? Shit, I don't know. Ideas in a work of art are like the half-cent toy surprises that come in cereal boxes. Whenever they're right there, on top, I end up not eating the cereal. And whenever I have to dig for the toy surprises, I end up just throwing the toy surprises away, because it was really the cereal I wanted, after all.

"There is a tribe of Indians or natives called the Chagas. Don't ask me where they hail from, for I am worthless with details. Probably someplace like South America or Africa. A place of jungles.

"The Chaga men are so manly they don't even shit.

"No shit.

"Shitlessness is the Chaga badge of masculinity. I shit you not.

"When the Chaga men hit puberty, they undergo a mystic ritual known as the 'Secret of the Men.' The ritual corks their assholes until old age.

"The Chaga men carry huge phallic sticks. The secret purpose of the sticks is to bury any evidence of unmanliness-- for the true Secret of the Men is that men shit. Of course the men shit. But women aren't supposed to know.

"If a Chaga man gets the Hershey squirts, his lodge brothers take him deep into the jungle until the runs have run their course. If a woman catches a man down in the dumps, he is in deep shit. He could lose all his cattle. He most certainly will not be the one to take the homecoming queen to the prom.

"The Chaga women have a secret too. They receive their secret while the men are getting their mystic corks sewn into place. Here is the secret of the women: They are told that men really shit-- but the badge of Chaga femininity is to let the men maintain

their illusions of illusion.

"We are the violators of a similar taboo. We show Male Shit. We can't figure out why it fascinates us. We don't know what we are saying. We don't understand why we're reviled far, far worse than the artists who show women and other human beings humiliated, stabbed, beaten and tortured-- you know, the sort of stuff that comes on prime time television all the time. Don't you think it's weird? You can show a picture of someone thrusting a knife into woman. But not a penis.

"We can't figure it out. All we know is we found Shit and we're showing it off. The reality of this Shit has surprised us.

"We fuck. It really happens. Really. This is the Secret of the Men and the Secret of the Women. With each act of congress, you see the most private uses of power. The politics of intercourse. We love it. Hate it. Have orgasms. Fake orgasms. Get dry. Get wet. Get hard. Stay limp. Have taboos, and break them. We seek kindness. We seek revenge. We seek satisfaction. We seek pain. We seek control and lose it.

"We fuck. It really happens. Our secret. Our art. It transforms us. It is beautiful. It is ugly.

"We fuck. It can kill us. It can immortalize us."

Maybe there was applause. There was mostly puking. As I left the podium. My dick statuette was just cold, dead weight in my hand. A very personal souvenir of a lost friend. I felt like I had been given a testimonial and told it is as good as a heart. Many would accept the substitute. In the Land of Oz, the Tin Woodsman did. But he was following the example of the scarecrow, who accepted a diploma in place of a brain.

I left the ceremony early. Headed straight for the stateroom. Swan turned up missing. I wandered the decks looking for her. I

kept running into mob musclemen with their heaters bulging in their pockets. Their peepers bulging in their sockets. Representatives of the major distributors imported to maintain order. True life professional killers to scare the shit out of you. Pig-eyed. Wearing brimstone cologne. Often they forced themselves on women who strayed from the fold. Sometimes it was out and out rape. Other times the chicks were just too scared to say no. From their primitive perspectives, these were whores anyway. Free cunt was just another job perk. Like free dope and free screwdrivers and smashing kneecaps. Scarlett Fever found herself trapped by one of these guys on the crow's nest last year. His arms were thicker than her legs. He had jumbo balls that would not be out of place on a rhino. She said it was the best fuck of her life.

I was starting to get seriously worried about Swan.

I figured the most likely place for her to hang out was the casino, so I went there. Breathing second hand smoke reminded me of you, Phoenix. And that was the problem. Everything reminds me of you. Smoke and fire. Booze and cigarettes. Sex. And Swan.

I got myself a drink which wasn't free, but it wasn't a Screwdriver either. The place was so crowded and fog bound with smoke, I couldn't tell if Swan was there or not. I kept doing circuits, hoping. All the money on display seemed to be making the ladies wet. The men kept reaching in their pockets. The deuces weren't the only things wild. Many games of poker were in progress.

By one a.m., I had successfully revitalized the alcohol content in my blood. A sad grey light came through the windows and bounced off the potted ferns hanging there. It lit the dust motes

and smoke spirals and cast crawling shadows on the bare gamblers who had detached from the award ceremony because they didn't expect to win anything. They weren't winning here either.

I had traveled fifteen hundred miles to escape nights like this, when grey light filters through unwashed windows. I think I will die on a night like this.

When I finished my drink, I played with a one armed bandit. I didn't put in any tokens. I just played with it. And pretended. It was a pornography of gambling. No risk. No gain. No satisfaction.

Swan wasn't in the casino, so I took to wandering the deck again.

For the longest time, I leaned over the railing. Watched the wind ripping open the waters. Where had my woman gone? Had she vanished into some great wet gash out there?

I looked around.

Eerie Canal stood next to me. It was eerie the way she appeared. Out of nowhere.

"You're troubled, Die," she said.

"I lost my woman. I'm afraid something terrible has happened to her."

"You have chosen to challenge terrible forces, Die Smiling. And you have done it with no protection. But now that I know what I am dealing with, we will have to take some precautions. I am going to have to do an exorcism. There will be great danger. The only way that I can succeed is if you do exactly what I tell you."

"Even if it destroys me? I heard this one before."

"You have to acquire faith. You will have to trust in God, for once in your life."

“I’m not up for this. Not tonight.”

“You are the one haunted by a ghost. Spiritual problems call for spiritual solutions. That is my specialty, Darling.”

“Look, Eerie. I only was in church once in my whole life. I point up to the guy on the platform, the one with the funny collar. I ask my mom, is that guy God? She gives me this look, and she shakes her head. So I say, ‘If God’s not here, can we go?’”

“I have a way to show you God’s face. I can make a believer out of you. Guaranteed. But the cost will be high, Darling.”

"I know it isn't real."

"It doesn't matter what is real. Only what works."

“You got a gift for marketing. Good line for the intellectual motto of the next century. Also a good pitch for selling snake oil.” I let out a deep, exhausted sigh. “Tell me what you want me to do.” Maybe I was starting to feel sorry for Eerie. Maybe I liked the way she always kept an upbeat attitude, even though I figured she'd be dead within a year or two. I didn't even know her all that well, apart from having fucked her professionally two or three times. Or maybe I was getting a dose of fear.

“The cost will be high, Darling.”

“A high cost in terms of *what*?”

“Ten, maybe twenty thousand dollars.”

I broke into a grin. "You're not being completely honest with me, Eerie."

"I have the same feeling, Darling."

"At least it is mutual."

"Do you want to turn it into a contest to see if we can top each other's lies? Like dueling tall tales. I have got such contests with my Guru. We build on each other's imaginings, but take care enough, just enough care, pay just enough attention, to keep the

story consistent. After awhile we reach the point where you can not tell what is real anymore. And, as my Guru says, when you reach that point, where no one know what is true anymore, you will come to love the contest..."

"... or you will have matched each other's madness."

"Sounds like my idea of true love, Darling." said Eerie.

"Dueling tails. I think your Guru was just trying to fuck you."

She got this weird look in her eyes. I thought she was going to say that I had to let her destroy me. Instead she said, "My Guru would not have to use a line on me. He can become anyone he wants to be. He has that power. Maybe I have even made love to him many times, many times, perhaps, and not known it."

"What, like in your sleep?"

"My guru. He's Mr. XXX."

I looked over my shoulder.

"I will tell you how to find your woman," said Eerie, putting on airs. Like a magic show. "She went to the award ceremony after all."

So I headed back toward the grand ballroom, alone. On through the blue room. The purple room. The green room. The orange room. Many of the players on the floor or up against the walls. Fucking in the shadows, away from the cameras. Not without an audience. Others were puking or pissing. Through the white room, through the violet room. Some had passed out. Drunk and exhausted. Waiting for the ship's crew or the mob musclemen to get them moving. It was a game they played. Something like musical chairs.

On into the black room, now empty, except for Swan and I. Swan had changed her mind at the last minute and showed up to

see me win something. She arrived too late. She wore a black satin dress. Spike heels and a black opera cape. Her hair was dyed red. Her lips were sky-blue. The green Dulcet Lyre bottle in her silver tipped hand was only a quarter full, and it was obvious where the missing part had gone. She showed up disguised as everything I had lost.

The brazier still burned.

"I'm not doing this again," Swan said. "From now on, your friends are your friends, and you are free to hang out with them all you want-- but I will not tag along. I'll make your fuck film. One lousy fuck film, and then I am retired."

"Hopefully not a lousy one."

"What difference if it is a hit or shit."

"I don't know. One letter."

"Porno is shit, Die."

"Yeah. It is male shit. I said something to that effect in my acceptance speech."

"How many did you win?"

"Just this. Just the one."

"There is something I have been wondering. It has been nagging at me all night. If not for me, would you go back to Phoenix? Would you keep at her to try to turn her 'maybe' into a yes?"

"I loved her. Very much."

"You would have ended up married to her, if not for me."

"Probably. If I hadn't fallen in love with you, I would have been weak enough to do what ever she asked. I would have bent to any conditions she chose to lay down. I would have let her destroy me. And yes, I would have married her. If not for you."

"The next time you write to her... when you send the wedding

invitation... you tell Phoenix McCullah-- *she owes me!*"

The great black clock chimed 4 a.m., its lungs as brazen as Eddie Poe said they were... clear and loud and deep... exceedingly musical... but so strange, you had to stop and think about why it terrifies you. And you swear you will never let it frighten you again, but every time you hear it, until the end of your days, you get hit the same way all over again; the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before.

Love,

Die

Letter XXXIII

March 1, 1991

Dear Die:

I know that I have missed, long missed, the deadline given in your ultimatum. I fear that you will not believe the excuses I offer, or the most extraordinary set of events I am about to relate. You will think I finally lost the remnants of what passes for my sanity, or I am trying to get attention. My explanation may sound reminiscent of the improbable tales that I used to concoct out of idleness, or to lend drama to an otherwise uneventful day. You remember, I am sure, all my fabrications and the way they stoked your suspicions of infidelity. My explanation may smack of my old drunken delusions. You will think I am presenting so wild a story as a desperate act, because I have missed your deadline.

I have story to tell. All of it is true, all of it written according to Dieter Smith's own code of honesty.

If you wish to prove, incontrovertibly, this love you have professed for me, then accept my story simply because of its source. Trust in my lips. Force yourself to believe the unbelievable, for the sake of love. It will alter forever the portals of your perception.

My landlady ignores a growing termite problem. Sometimes I find the edges of my law books nibbled to delicate lace. Tiny holographic wings and chewed husks of miniature princes decorate my desk. When I got back to Los Angeles from Christmas break, I found your marriage proposal waiting for me. The termites tasted your words before I did. Little pin pricks interspersed a stellar

punctuation across your message, a planetarium I could hold in my hands; a miniature horoscope to decide my fate. Parts of the message were missing, forcing me to guess at the meaning.

After I read your immodest proposal, I concluded that you are in love with the woman I used to be, not the woman I am now.

I pondered your ultimatum. This conflict always underscored our love. If we commit to one another, in whose world will we live?

I found one of the bottles of Dulcet Lyre that have mysteriously appeared of late in my apartment and poured myself a drink without hesitation. Certain circumstances require intoxication, even on the part of the reformed.

I was shocked by your offer, shocked by demands you would make of me. Perhaps what shocked me the most was my own indecision. Can the old Phoenix be resurrected?

So have I waited too long? Have I lost you?

Didn't you stop to think about the timing of your indecent proposal, your ultimatum to me, Die Smiling? Didn't it occur to you that I might not be in Los Angeles? The week between Christmas and New Years universally coincides with Winter break.

There were two occasions in the past when I was confronted with an important decision about how to deal with you, Die. On both those occasions, I feared that whatever destiny I would meet would be the product of appetite, rather than reason. On both those occasions, I reached out to Jay to alleviate whatever base needs drove me to act impulsively. The first of those two occasions was on the road to Lovehollow, that day in June now preserved in our art. The second occasion took place in Hightstown. Both occasions had terrible, far reaching consequences.

Despite the lessons of those two episodes, I reached out to John Holmes in the same way I had reached out to Jay, and for the same reasons, and with the same disastrous results.

I did not seriously think you would act on your ultimatum. I was counting on the timing of your one week deadline, on your playing against the odds that I would not receive your letter in time to respond. But the truth of the matter is, and I must now recant the one small fib I told earlier in this letter, the truth is, I had not gone back to Boston during Winter Break. I was here, in Los Angeles.

In my heart, I believed I could set things right between us by confessing the circumstances of my betrayal, even though the confession was long overdue. In my heart, I thought this confession would undo years of harm, and that you would be willing to make any sacrifices I required of you.

During passing fits of rationality, I tried to console myself, insisting that the ghost I kept seeing was a mere metaphor, a message from the deepest fathoms of my subconscious, that the aspect of Jay's ghost which actually haunted our love was in fact your jealousy, your inability to forgive me for that one indiscretion, and my inability to forgive you for not forgiving me. I told myself our screenplay served as a kind of séance to rouse and exorcize this ghost.

That is what I wished to believe, that my nightmares were symbols and not literal truths. But now I don't know... I just don't know...

So why didn't I write to you sooner?

There is a reason. There is a very good reason, though it is somewhat difficult to believe. If you are willing to suspend your disbelief, if you are willing to have faith in me and in my story set

down as truly as I can tell it, if you are willing to accept me at my word, even though rationality and prior experience would persuade you otherwise, then you might understand my delay and you might forgive me.

The night that your indecent proposal arrived, I called John Holmes in panic. We talked for several hours. I flirted shamelessly. I wanted him, and I let him know how much I wanted him, in subtle and unsubtle ways.

We made a date for the following night.

It has been years since I made love to anyone.

I looked forward to this date with John. I woke up that morning full of hope, thinking of nothing but the date. It had been too long in coming.

He shared with me an essay he had submitted to Professor Weiss. He wrote it as a gift for me. His essay, a critique of Jenkins v. Georgia, was the oddest kind of love letter I had ever received.

In that case, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the conviction of a theater owner on the grounds that the film in question-- Carnal Knowledge -- had "serious artistic merit." The Court took it upon itself to indulge the old question of good art and bad art, retreating a little from the rigidity of the Miller Test. Although the jury still has the first chance to determine if the work is obscene, the elusive quality of "artistic merit" remains a question of law, as well as a question of fact. To put it simply, "artistic merit" can be argued on appeal as a question of law, and left for the elite minds of the appellate courts to decide. So Holmes concluded, almost as a kind of joke, that Jenkins v. Georgia has the effect of returning erotic art to its prior status-- as an upper class prerogative.

"Professor Weiss is not going to like this."

"Professor Weiss has a side she doesn't show in class. You

know, her Jayne Payne imitation was flawless; I mean absolutely perfect. She's obviously got a theatrical side. And she must have watched a lot of Jayne Payne movies."

"Galen Weiss? I don't think so. I am more willing to believe that she became mediumistic."

"So you believe in ghosts?"

"I feel haunted."

"There is a place I want to take you," he said. "An abandoned mansion out in the wilderness. It reminds me of Lovehollow."

I went with him, out of curiosity, out of guilt, as an excuse to procrastinate further my decision about your proposal. I packed quickly, taking only essentials.

John insisted on taking the Firebird. Despite my misgivings, I acceded to his wishes.

When he opened the car door and climbed in, he was wearing one of the masks from his Porno disguise kit. Feeling nervous and uncertain, I asked him to take it off, which he did, speedily. He wore another mask on underneath.

I laughed, but also I began to panic. And I began to wonder who he really was.

He said, "I think Galen Weiss learned how to do impressions the same way I did. I learned how to shift the vocal range, mimic an obvious accent. These things help. But I also learned how to get away with just a superficial imitation of tone. This will work, but only when I internalize the deeper essence of a person. Copy the program. People run on programs, just like computers. Like how they orient to time. Like whether they fixate on past or present. Or future. Copy the program. Anyone can be a different person."

I was almost ready to believe him. He seemed like someone else. And so did I. I didn't care if he was a ghost or not. I was having fun. I wanted to be with him, whoever he was.

We drove for countless hours, flat roads giving way to roller coaster paths cut into the mountains. I had no idea where we were going.

When we arrived at the mansion, we found its great gates unguarded. It looked as if it had been maintained perfectly by some unseen host.

Mock Grecian statues, medusas and Cyclops, promenaded along the path to the hidden mansion. Unlike the statutes at Lovehollow, these were not broken, but rather they were whole and robust, lifelike and wanton in their poses.

Portions of the mansion's textile block and masonry fabric had been cut away to admit trees, to fuse the facade with uncontrolled growth. Rural currents flowed from the environs through the edifice.

At the top of the mansion a soaring spire thrust into the heavens, ornamenting the place like a pagan steeple.

Holmes fastened his lips onto mine, kissing right through the mask's mouth hole. What I had thought was rubber felt warm and active, surprisingly sensual to the touch. But the more he aroused me, the more nervous, and the more tense I became, my lips stiffening, corpselike. The more he inflamed my passions, the more frigid I seemed, and the deeper I became entangled in a reverse feedback loop.

Holmes seemed to sense my confusion. He said, "I've been aching to catch a glimpse of the woman who once loved Die Smiling. I still haven't met her. Why don't you let go of yourself and be yourself. Become who you were once. You need to loosen

up. You've gone too far the other way."

The masked man asked me to reveal myself.

"I thought you were trying to help me."

"I am."

Holmes and I entered the mansion without setting off any alarms.

The place had been decorated in a *mélange* of styles. Antique furniture glistened around us, looking perfectly new. So much of it was very familiar. I felt as if I had stepped into the past. I thought I recognized pieces came out of Lovehollow, and from our old apartment.

There was a bottle of Dulcet Lyre. "Where did it come from?" I asked John.

"Not from me."

"They don't even make the stuff anymore." I took a swig and it felt substantial enough. I felt less so.

On the wall hung tapestries done in a pseudo oriental style. The scenes were lewd, but ambitious in design, magnificent failures. Blue windows of tinted glass suffused the interior with an embryonic glow. On a shelf, among Tiffany lamps and fluted ceramic ornaments glazed with acidic green, stood a duplicate set of the ivory gods and goddesses. New pieces had been added, including medusas and Cyclops, couples enacting Bacchanalian rituals, holy orgies. Rendered with consummate artistry, lifelike, the gods and goddesses, the medusas and Cyclops, seemed less statuary and more the embodiment of rapture fused with eternity, a statement of absolute joy in silence and captive motion.

Holmes said, "At first it seemed a crazy coincidence. But coincidence has stopped surprising me. I find the world full of repeating patterns. You've activated preternatural forces,

Phoenix."

As we moved toward the bedroom, he began to slough off his pants. I froze.

John said, "I once loved a woman, so much like you, a paragon of..."

"I know. She fell in love with your best friend. You told me. It is a story I have heard before."

"I love you as much as I loved her. In a way, you are the same woman."

His mask had changed again, without my realizing it. Now a Cyclops face stared at me, a single eye and a single sharp fang in a hollow mouth. The cheekbones jutted weirdly, knobby and misshapen. I stared back into the single eye, alive and glistening. His true face had been revealed, whether it was a mask or not, the face of unfettered male urgency, the bestial reign of instinct.

"Who do you want me to be? How about Mr. XXX?"

He laughed and took off his shirt, displaying the tightly packed muscles of my most recent fantasy infatuation.

I pushed Holmes away. The situation soured, like a dream turning to nightmare.

"Who are you?" He wasn't Holmes. He was, but he wasn't.

"I am a man who fell in love. I lost my love to my best friend. A familiar character in a familiar story... I used to be an individual until I was opened up to possibilities, unseen forces. I could be anyone. An army of wronged lovers came marching up from deep structures within my brain. I became a universal. An archetype. A constant. A cipher..."

A ghost.

He pushed open the door. "You want to see how it is done? Do you want to watch me do it?"

Inside, the bedroom, there was an antique bed, with firebirds carved into the headboards.

"The male phoenix is an icon of bliss, the female majesty. Their union evokes the aspirations and fulfillment of marriage."

I trembled.

I had too blithely accepted the fantastic, too casually embraced unreality. The ghost I had expected was not the ghost I got. Through the face of the Cyclops, he began to talk like Jay.

"By giving in to me, you restore a balance. It is justice, in a way.

"I am the one who is supposed to end up with you. I am the one. It was supposed to have been a swap, you see. A swap from the very beginning. Die and I had agreed upon it. I came through for him, but he welshed on the deal. So I should get you back."

I felt as if I were reliving our first night in the original Lovehollow, an enactment of the lie that killed Jay, a finish to the task he'd left undone in Hightstown. It wasn't a metaphor. It wasn't a dream symbol of your failure to forgive me. It was a ghost. It was Jay himself, back from the dead, to come between us. He used a trademark comment, an expression which had passed between him and me alone. Even after all I had sacrificed for him in the past, Jay had not forgiven me. His malice lingered. It seemed a retraction of grace, a punishment for all my recent lapses. Jay will never forgive us, Die. In his life, he viewed friendship as an entitlement. He viewed us as his possessions.

Who was he possessing now?

He asked, "What happens at this point? Sex or violence? It is your choice. It is, after all, still your story. If you were telling a lie to someone, if you were trying to convince him that what happens at this point is the absolute truth, what would you tell him about what happens now between us? Sex or violence?"

I backed away.

He continued, "What do you prefer in a story? Why is it always one or the other?"

"How about comic relief?"

He laughed in a way that was neither comic nor relieving. "No. It has to be sex or violence. I can be your fantasy... your dream lover. Anyone. If you could have anyone at all, who would it be? Who would you love?"

I knew at once who I wanted that night, the same person I have wanted every night, and would always want.

"Die."

His single eye gaped, his long tongue flicked the tip of his sharp tooth. I had given him his answer, his justification to do what ever he felt like doing. He was right. It had to be Sex or violence. One or the other. Or both. His single eye, his hollow mouth with its single tooth reminded me of the self satisfied smile that Jay had smiled, back on that night in Hightstown when he thought he had won.

Holmes, or whoever he was, stepped toward me.

I stopped thinking of him as a real person. Instead, I viewed him as something that should have been dead. Perhaps he was something dredged up from my subconscious, a metaphor that had taken flesh, a malevolent force that still stood between you and I, Die. This time, I would not surrender myself to it.

Sex or violence.

I turned and ran out of the door, through the lawn, past the guardian statues. John raced after me. I run so much faster than I did in the old days, but the burden of recent abuses began to weigh on my lungs. I felt as if I were trying to breathe through wet paper. A stitch pierced my side.

I made it to the Firebird, fumbled the door open, got into the glove compartment just as he fell upon me.

Sex or violence.

I aimed into his single, wet eye and squeezed the trigger. The gun jumped in my hand. The force and noise of the gunshot drove me backward, but I could see, through the smoke, the bullet had smacked into his chest. Then Holmes flew backward as if caught in a hurricane wind.

I fled the place. I waited until I was a safe distance away before I started to call the police, but by then I was lost. I had no idea where to find this abandoned mansion, this new Lovehollow. So I didn't make the phone call. I would have sounded too weird. Although I had acted in self defense, no one would believe me. They would think that I was insane, for certain. I would end up under treatment again, and under the numbing influence of psychotropic drugs.

You think that I am lying. You always had a problem with lending credibility to my reports, for I am too much of a storyteller with a penchant for embellishment.

Or perhaps you might find another explanation more credible. I am losing my mind.

Are you willing to forgive me, even though in my heart it is years too late and I can never forgive you for all the harm you've done to both of us? Will you forgive me without my making the first move to forgive you?

Will you still love me even if I am completely out of my mind, and will you let me destroy you with my mad love?

If you will see me one more time, we'll bring about an end to our love.

An end or a rebirth.

I will be at Lovehollow, escaping into my past, back to the best days of my life. Like my namesake, my future lies in my past, my past lies in my future. There is nowhere else for me to hide.

Love,

Phoenix

Letter XXXIV

March 20, 1991

Dear Phoenix:

Swan and I had been using her place in Martha's Vineyard as home base. Dodging scut work I didn't feel like doing. Playing. Delaying.

I made arrangements to lease Lovehollow. After months of what my lawyer called the title search from Hell. I can't figure out what the fuck was so complicated and expensive. Maybe someday you can explain it to me.

Every time I asked to so-called owners about the story behind the place, they changed the subject. Acting like the truth involved some embarrassing family secret. Like they were afraid that the truth would put me off their overpriced lease. But after awhile I got the feeling they had no idea about the history of the place. The mystery act was a cover-up. Maybe they have no more claim on Lovehollow than you and I did when we lived there.

The Lotus was packed and ready for the trip to the Pan Handle to check the place out when the postman showed up. We almost didn't get your letter in time. We had planned to hit the road much earlier, but our good intentions got way-laid.

On the road, on our way to Lovehollow, Swan sorted through our mail.

Swan asked, "What does all this mean for us, Die? What's gonna' happen when you have to deal with Phoenix?"

I said to Swan, "You and I blend like a vodka martini, while the only cocktail Phoenix and I approximate is a Molotov."

"There are similar ex's in my past. Well-- only one. No, two. Three. Maybe three. Guys I can't face without fireworks."

"Phoenix and I have that history."

She reached into her handbag and brought out a pack of Balkan Sobranies. "Have us both." One gold tipped cigarette came to her lips. Then she thought better of it, and pitched it into the night.

"Cloning is beyond my budget. Bigamy isn't doable against the backdrop of what some might call a high profile media event and others would call a scandal. Besides, I doubt I could handle you and Phoenix both. Not even I could do it."

"I meant that I could be her sometimes."

An awkward silence followed. Occasionally the engine would cough, forcefully, deliberately, like it was being tested for an inguinal hernia.

Swan said, "Iream taught me some of his secret ways of turning into someone else. I can push the right buttons to run the personality program. He taught me some of his secrets. I could be Phoenix, sometimes."

Pliny once said there can only be one Phoenix on Earth at a time. It was one of your favorite quotes, but I didn't tell Swan.

That's when Swan zeroed in on your letter.

She assigned herself the task of reading aloud, doing her very best Phoenix imitation. I let her. I was functioning on no sleep. I didn't care anymore. Almost.

I didn't know what surprises lurked inside the perfumed envelope.

The Lotus went topless. Swan had to shout sometimes so I

could hear over the roar of the wind and the drone of the tires.

When she was done, she looked at me, shaken. "Oh Shit, Die. What's going on?"

"I don't know. You can never tell with Phoenix."

"Do you think it is true?"

She sounded pissed off and threatened. Still shuffling through the pages of the perfumed letter. Rereading key passages to herself. Muttering. I had a bad feeling about the tunnels that had swallowed Swan's train of thought.

Her question caught me off guard. Was it true? The word was starting to get up my crack like a wedgie.

"No. I don't think it is true. Sounds more like one of her wet daydreams. A posh setting. Littered with personal symbols. A touch of romance. A touch of danger. A touch of surreal absurdity. A violent climax. A rape fantasy doesn't surprise me. Exactly the kind of stories she always used to pawn off as true."

"But part of it is true, isn't it, Die? I recognize the house. You do, too. This is Iream's place. Phoenix has been seeing Iream. Oh God... do you think she killed him?"

"No. I don't think so. I don't. But then... I don't know for sure."

"What a letter. What a crazy thing. What a mess..."

I said to Swan, "The time has come for me to come clean. I have something to tell you. Iream and I had this whole thing planned. Yeah, it was sort of a swap meat. Awhile back, I said Iream Insider wanted to use his real name in Porno, but couldn't. He couldn't because his real name is John Holmes."

"I knew that. How are you going to tell Phoenix?"

I shrugged. "This way, right here. In Dialogue. In this letter. Besides, it's something she already guessed."

Swan shook her head sadly, just as you are probably doing as you read this letter.

Bear in mind, Phoenix, I thought I lost you. Forever. You told me many many many times we would never get back together. Otherwise, I would have not done this.

Johh a/k/a Iream and I have been swapping women much the same way me and Jay used to back in the old days. Of course, Iream is much better at this than Jay ever was.

I wouldn't have attempted this swap meat if I didn't think John would be good for you. I told you, I love John. If I can't have you, I would rather you be with someone good. There were times, when we improvised scenes from The Flick just to see how they played, John sounded so much like Jay it made me feel I owed him something, a long unpaid debt. When I was writing our Flick, I mixed up old banter I had with Jay years ago with banter I was having with Iream while I plotted this swap. Some of Jay's lines got put in my mouth and vice versa. Iream's lines weren't always Jay's. My lines weren't always mine. Right now, I couldn't say for sure who said what or when. I reported the truth, but in disguise. Here's the bottom line. I agreed to a swap. You for Swan.

What went wrong? Beats the fuck out of me. I don't know if Iream got carried away with his role, or if his role carried away Iream.

I said to Swan, "I think Phoenix figured out my swapping scheme and now she's trying to fuck with my head."

Phoenix, please tell me you you're scamming me back to fuck with my head. Phoenix, tell me you didn't really shoot John.

There was nothing but the roar of the wind and the drone of the tires. And the radio. Noticeable for the first time because it wasn't being overshadowed by Swan's sultry voice. The radio

played soft and inconspicuous. Endless combinations of public domain riffs oozed out. Beat to beat. Turning the moment to nebulosity. Love as the gist of background music interrupted every now and then by love as the gist of commercials.

"How are you going to deal with this?"

"I don't know what to do. Not call the cops, I think. Face it together, whatever, with you. I feel stuck to you. Superglued, so close, so tight I can't pull myself away without ripping off my skin. We have to deal with it together."

She looked at the highway whizzing by like she was being forced to decide how to land on it. "Are you talking about obligation? Are you trying to avoid using the L-word."

"Of course I love you. I love you more than anyone, from the very first moment, that whole love at first sight routine with multicolor floating valentines and cupid arrows and whole string sections of cosmopolitan orchestras exploding with syrupy refrains, and minstrels spouting hallmark doggerel, the kind of happening I used to put down as chick porno. Yeah, I love you. You are the one, the only absolute one, like what physicists call a singularity, a black hole that sucks up my life and swallows everything."

"Are you talking to me, or Phoenix?"

The same tourist checkpoints have been laid all over the continent in a way that lets you ramble over hundreds of miles and never leave home. The road back to Lovehollow offered faltering neon signs. Truck stops. Motels equipped with cable and satellite dishes where no one sleeps. And nudie bars so full that you would think every idle penis in the land had taken to the interstate that night. A roadkill aesthetic graces the architecture.

"Should we turn back? Call the cops?"

"No. No cops. Not yet. Something about this story rubs me the wrong way."

"You believe Phoenix no matter what she says. Even when you know she's lying."

I shut up.

"We'll find Phoenix and find out what really happened, maybe, if we can do some looking around and get some source of information other than what she tells us. Better not to call the cops. Not yet."

I kept telling myself that with you, no one can ever tell what's real and what's not.

We passed drive-thru restaurants that promote chicken with a reverence once reserved for burgers. The same kind of venerable jingles and logos. The shift in the appetites of American meat eaters has caused whole new towns to spring up along the southern roads you and I used to travel. All the commerce centers around chicken abattoirs.

Migrant hordes of non-union, minimum-wage chicken workers choked the freeways going from town to town. Gypsies riding Harlies. Or their extended thumbs. Chicks hunting for paychecks to blow. Itinerant torch girls and peelers by night, who slaughter a different kind of cock by day.

White feathers floated thick in my headlights. Made me feel like I was driving through a Christmas ad or a pillow fight. The smog left a greasy film of burnt poultry fat on the windshield.

Swan said, "You need to pull into the next service plaza. You're on E."

"You'd be surprised how far I can go on E."

We passed a string of service plazas, their gas pumps impotent, bone dry as we say in the biz. No one presented to

offer assistance, no matter how cool I acted or presented that big tipper image. Each place had a veneer of regulated neglect. Tincture of the look that gives trailer parks and diners their sameness, their style, their aura of timelessness. Tincture of Oldsmobiles on cinder blocks, looking like totems of a lost romance. It took a while for me to register the fact that these patterns of disrepair, these abandoned service stations, were not mere symptoms of highway entropy. These were monuments to the void. Lovehollows of the road.

"But what about Iream?" asked Swan. "What if he's hurt and needs help?"

"Do you even know where that house is?"

"No. Don 't you?"

"I don't even know what state it's in. Iream always made sure I was drunk, or stoned as hell, whenever he took me there. Blindfolded with chemicals. He keeps the location secret. His fortress of solitude."

"What if he's hurt? What if he's dying?"

"This whole thing is one of his tricks. It has gotten too weird to be real. I'm sure of it. All stage magic. Or Phoenix fabrication."

"I hope so. I really hope so. Because if Phoenix has told us the truth, Iream's dead. Most likely."

"Yeah. If Phoenix told the truth... If!"

"Yeah. She could be lying. Or crazy."

The idea seemed to make her feel better. "I'm going to let you decide what's best. You do whatever. We can deal with it. Whatever comes. The 3 of us will deal with it. Or maybe the 4. Oh, God, I hope it's the 4. I trust you, Die. I trust you to take good care of Phoenix, and to take good care of me, too."

And it didn't dawn on me until much later that whatever

Swan did to help you, Phoenix, had nothing to do with trust. Or letting me call the shots. She did what was best for Phoenix because she was forgetting who she was.

Bitter past experience taught me not try the adjacent country dirt mazes. I stuck to the turnpike. Swan fell asleep, which meant I didn't have to court her illusions anymore. Your letter would make Swan alternately challenged, pissed off, and horny over the days to follow. I debated whether to tell her what was going on in my head. There are those who say that keeping sexual secrets makes them fester into obsessions, that couples should discuss flirtations, even attractions. Turn them into something shared rather than something private. Which makes perfect sense if you want your electrify your romance. Some couples get a charge out of jealousy. And some use the charge of jealousy like it's a credit card. Charging their romance into bankruptcy. So I just ruminated, with nothing to distract me but the swaying of the gas gauge.

When I hit Willoughby County, I left the turnpike. The sight of familiar ground relaxed me. Filled with memories and old associations, I no longer felt any concern at all about the residue of prehistory sloshing around in the gas tank. Or the lack of it.

On past the witch tree. Past the fields of stud horses sleeping upright. Swan slept. Not even the jarring rumble of the dirt roads could wake her.

When we arrived at Lovehollow, the gas gauge suddenly shot upright, fully erect. Something had endowed me with new reserves.

The place had been fixed up. Sort of. A single coat of lurid pink, a color usually associated with trim, had been slapped over the whole place.

I got out of the car. Went up the creaking porch steps. I opened the front door. Pockets of old, waiting air broke loose and the strong smell of sex breathed in my face. Fresh and potent. The shock of returning hit me. Along with the toxic buzz of sleep deprivation.

All the furniture had been removed. So had the trinkets, the toys, the mementoes. Without its ornaments, Lovehollow seemed like a frame for petrified emptiness. A museum of vacuums I could fill with my waning memories. My penis stirred like a divining rod every time I approached a place where you and I had made love. Almost everywhere. The foyer where we broke the couch. The dining room where you used to prop your left foot up on the heavy oak table and raise your ass to me. The master bedroom where you once challenged me to keep you in a state of non-stop orgasm for a full hour, and I gave you two, or at least it seemed that way to me. The staircase where we made our own wet and sloppy fireworks on the 4th of July. You can still see the stains. Especially the one shaped like an explosion. The big bang.

And then I saw the blood. Maroon and rust colored splatters in what used to be the living room. Bare footprints, deep brown, placed like a dance lesson for someone learning how to stumble.

The footprints led to the kitchen.

The place was empty. With the notable exception of a refrigerator that hadn't been there before. It was a big thing. Old. With a bloody handprint on the white enamel door. Rust colored, like the other stains, only this stain was cracked and caked like the surface of an old oil painting.

Who the fuck had been bleeding in Lovehollow?

The refrigerator dominated the otherwise vacant kitchen. It was running on no apparent power source. Like it ran on will and

stubbornness. A quick inventory told me that the previous house guest, maybe the one who lost so much blood, had left behind many lobsters, all of them rotten, a salami that still seemed edible, bananas, ditto, mayo, several sweaty bottles of Dulcet Lyre, assorted vegetables, wrapped and rotting, and one box of Arm and Hammer baking soda. The shelves were moist and rusty. I helped myself to a bottle, and carried a second back to the car.

Armed with booze, I risked waking Swan. This is a woman who hates to have her sleep disturbed, no matter what the circumstances.

Her green eyes slit open. It took her a few minutes to realize where she was.

"So this is the big deal?"

I nodded.

We went in together, and surveyed the place room by room. First the big, stripped living room. Some modest effort had been made to buff the termite frescoed floors, but it only filled the grids with a lighter, dustier shade of their own raw matter. We continued through the strange corridors. Up the teetering staircase that flaunted its risks like an old hooker who knows she's got no charm left but sleaze. Swan's bone hard heels echoed with unexpected hollowness. It gave a sense of how fragile the house had become. Like it was being held together by nothing more than its new coat of pink paint. Old disasters had embedded themselves. Waiting to form the basis of disasters yet to be. The obvious dangers, like the possibility of the roof falling in or the floors giving way didn't seem to bother Swan too much. She got off on the way the house was crumbling in her wake.

On the top story, she started to strip, old peacock feathers flying around her. When she was naked, except for stiletto heeled

boots, I searched her for some trace of the alleged reformed loser. You never saw such musculature on such slender legs, like an anorectic bodybuilder. She was strutting around, spindly as a new born foal, yet with a sense of balance that mocked every law of physics, except for the one no one has figured out yet. The one you think is God.

"I feel Phoenix out here. Her presence feels threatening and angry." She trembled for a second, in a kind of put on way. I wondered if she was picking up on the sex smell. "I can feel her watching us."

I yelled, "*PHOENIX!*" I looked around. Shrugged. But I also felt something.

So who was out there, lingering? I don't want to use the word ghost. Maybe just my past. Coming back at me. With a vengeance. But there is a resonance in Lovehollow I can't describe. An imprint. Old events preserved, like whatever it was that used to happen to the past back in the days before they could digitalize it. I think I got used the house's creepy sensations after living with them for so long. I didn't notice them until I left and stayed away and came back. Something in the air felt heavy and overbearing.

I said, "Phoenix isn't here."

"This is where she was coming."

So where were you? Just in my head? Or hiding somewhere in our old haunt. I could imagine your showing up here. Finding the emptiness. Facing the memories. Slashing your wrists, not because you felt like ending it all, but to piss me off. A typical Phoenix-like indulgence. All overstatement. Tasting the edge. The blade. Raising red plumes while you danced out the fire of your life. A great pumping. Liquid inferno. Splattering your rage.

Yeah, I could see you pulling a stunt like that.

But I could just as easily see you splattering the place with paint or chicken blood. And hiding somewhere so you could watch me react.

To see what I would do.

I looked around. Scoping out the shadows. I saw nothing. But I felt eyes on me. Someone watching. An invisible audience. Like the feeling I get when I'm in the studio and the cameramen have hidden themselves well.

I said to Swan. "It feels like she is here. I does. I know what you mean. But for me, I could just be memories."

"It feels like she has been soaked into the place. Past, present, future. It's all a fraud. Everything that happens makes a mark that never fades. All here, forever." She was off on some wild tangent I couldn't follow. Trying to imitate something told to her by a famous self-improvement guru on the prowl. Only it came out in Swan language. A kind of nonsense. But it got me thinking about the months that lay ahead. Old events would be recreated. Right here. Where they occurred. Recreated in a way that would endure. But she was talking about something else, whatever it was.

Swan composed herself on the floor, against a backdrop of stain. Maybe she thought it was just paint. Or maybe she sensed it might be something vital that leaked out of her rival.

Swan said, "Make love to me in her presence."

April 1, 1991

I had planned to take the car into town to pick up some groceries from the convenience store. But someone had slashed

the tires. I ran around the perimeters, looking for a clue. No one in sight.

Out in the dirt, not far from the main highway, I found fresh tire tracks. Big fat tires that brought to mind the converted Winabago that takes Fossil Bone studio on the road. For a minute I felt relieved. Thinking about the old gang, showing up to surprise us. Maybe sneaking some shots of hot footage. But then I remembered my slashed tires.

Maybe it wasn't the whole gang. Maybe just one member. Coming out here all by himself. Or following Phoenix.

At least Iream was still alive.

To keep Swan from freaking out, I told her we had run out of gas. She lost her temper, and launched into a great long breathless harangue about my carelessness. The tongue lashing brought to mind my last days of being in Grace. Then she really chewed me out. I took it like a man.

We opened another bottle of Dulcet Lyre. Swan started drinking. We walked back to the main road to hitch a ride. We spent the morning watching the grass get dewy.

Wandering around, looking for a shady covered place to make love, we came on the Firebird. It was covered by the overhanging branches of a dead eucalyptus. The windshield had been shattered. One headlight gone. Rust spread like a rash over its exposed flanks. The bullet hole still crowned the hood. It looked like it could have been crashed and rusting out here since the night Jay ran off and we went looking for him.

Phoenix, I wondered why you had neglected the car so badly. And I wondered where you were.

When Swan and I came back to the house, we found it humid, musky inside. The whole place had been softened by long

exposure to wetness.

I entered.

Moving through pink corridors. The passage seemed to widen on contact.

The pink walls quaked.

Swan stopped me suddenly, saying, "Is it just me, or does it feel like someone's watching?"

"Yeah, that's what it feels like. Someone watching, and not just you."

And that's what it felt like, Phoenix.

It felt like being watched.

Like me and Swan were being taken into someone's thoughts. A consciousness that hung in the air. Curious. Something you could almost touch.

"Do you mind being watched?" I asked.

"I guess you are used to it."

"Yeah."

Ghostly flashes of red reflected in Swan's eyes.

Something red flew past the warped windows. Like hair blown around. Or blood seeping into water.

Cobwebs stirred by breath from nowhere. Like ghost lips blowing ghost kisses.

"If we're going to be watched, let's put on a show," said Swan.

We put on a hell of a show for whoever might be watching. To shake the shadows. To make whoever it was come out.

By the time me and Swan trudged back to the dead eucalyptus, we were hazy from drink and afterglow.

Someone had moved the Firebird.

"She was here. Is she gone?" Swan, looking at the empty

shadows. "No. She's not gone. Past, present, future. It is all a fraud. Everything is eternal."

"Sounds very Zen to me." Zen being a personal code for Bullshit.

"I don't want to leave."

"Aren't you hungry? I mean, for something that isn't salami?"

"What did you and Phoenix do for food?"

"There used to be a garden and a fishing pole and tackle and bait."

"We will find the pole if we look hard. It still exists, the same as she still exists."

"You are on quite the Zen jag."

Who knows when, 1991

We lost track of days. Stretching out the salami. Trying to make it sustain us. Killing time the way you and I used to kill time when we had the place to ourselves.

I never got over the feeling of being watched. Someone, or something, seemed to be following us. Everywhere we went. Everything we did. Like a prolonged truck shot.

Mostly, it felt like I was being watched by you, Phoenix. Maybe because I still couldn't get you out of my mind. And maybe that's why I felt like I was inside your mind as well. It was like Swan and I had fallen into someone else's consciousness. That consciousness kept opening. Like the petals of a lotus. To pull us in deeper.

At first I took some weird comfort in the thought of you watching me. At least it meant that you were alive. Somewhere outside my grasp.

Some nights a one eyed car would circle the house.
Sometimes rooms in Lovehollow would fill with brilliant light.
Light from nowhere.

But as the days dragged on, and my head got into stranger modes, I started thinking of ways you might be dead, but still watching anyway. Gone, but still there.

Swan woke up one morning to find her hair had turned red. At first she laughed about it. Then she cried. What the hell was going on?

“The aftershock of bad nutrition,” I suggested. “Or being out in the sun. Years of chemical changes. Or some other kind of change.”

Somehow, she had made good on her claim. Somehow, she was turning into you. It was like someone had been coaching her. She played you to the hilt.

What Swan had said about the past started to make sense to me. Maybe it was all the Dulcet Lyre I had been drinking. Or the way all my blood supply was being continually rerouted away from my brain.

I understood her. A new Phoenix. Reborn. I put on the greatest performance of my career. It felt like we were creating something between us. Something ... I don't know... eternal.

As the intensity increased between me and Swan, so did the feeling of being watched. Maybe it was the way Swan always seemed to play to unseen cameras. We didn't mind. Swan acquired a kind of radiance that went beyond beauty. Like she was leaving an imprint on nature with sheer perfection. Like a masterpiece painting that can survive without its canvas.

Someone else had entered the house. I was certain. Maybe more than one person. Watching. I could feel it. And more than

just watching. It felt like Swan and me were being watched and changing whoever was watching us. We were being watched and being remembered. Really remembered. Locked in memory.

Like being filmed.

Yeah, it felt like we were being filmed. Like there was a crew hidden somewhere. The masters of camouflage. Infused into the walls. In the air. Recording not just our words. Our acts. Also our thoughts. A phantom movie. One that shows everything. Nothing hidden. Like the flick they hit you with when your life is over.

I kept scoping out the shadows. Looking for the Cyclops.

I woke up in the middle of the night, dazed. Alone. Drunk, weak and delirious from hunger and sperm depletion.

I called out for Swan. I don't know where she went.

I walked around in the darkness for awhile. Looking for her. Something about the house had changed. Strange shapes appeared in the whorls of wood grain. Skulls. Tombstones. My frame of mind. Looking at the world the way a zombie sees it. I wondered if I was sleep walking.

In the living room, someone had started a fire. Floor boards had been pulled up. They'd been thrown into the flames. Someone feeding the house into its own gullet.

Then I saw a form slumped over in the chair, facing away from me. Slumped in an odd, off kilter way. Sweaty red hair flowed down the like dried blood from a head wound.

“Swan?”

Your voice answered me, Phoenix.

“Die.”

But the word didn't come from the person on the chair. I couldn't place the direction the sound came from. Maybe my own head.

"Phoenix?"

“Die.” This time it sounded like a man's voice.

The figure in the chair turned to face me. Head craning around, without rising from the chair. As the head swiveled around, the red hair crept up the chair's back.

Red hair fell over the face.

For a second, I thought I had found Swan.

Then a man's face peered at me through the curtain of the red wig. Someone wearing a mask, one of those porno masks.

An Iream Insider mask.

“Do you know the number of the Phoenix?”

What was he trying to do? The question seemed meaningless. But it bothered me because it was so carefully crafted. Designed to make me freak. So I did the opposite. I calculated my answer. "People usually pick 3 when given a choice. 3 would fit. Phoenix and the two men she is usually playing with at any given time to keep her options open. But her number could be 2. The Phoenix who was dead and the one reborn? Or are you after her phone number?"

"4. The 4 stages of alchemical transformation. Also the 4 of us."

"I'm not good at math. I always thought numbers were so named because they make people numb."

"The number is 4. It was supposed to have been a swap. Didn't you come out here to complete our swap?"

"What??"

He asked, "What do the Swan and the Phoenix have in common?"

At least it wasn't another math question. I answered with a gesture that seemed to offend him.

And he said, like he was correcting my answer, "The Swan, with its death song of awesome beauty, is the same as desire which brings about its own end."

Something about the way he used words. His style. A kind of signature. At that moment, I felt like I had stepped into one of your lies, Phoenix. That you had enlisted some guy to play a part.

I put on a tough guy posture. A kind of threat in my voice. "So where are they? Where are Phoenix and Swan?"

"Do you believe in magic?"

"No."

"You should. We are going to use magic to correct a mistake. It was supposed to have been a swap. But you took Phoenix. And you took Swan. And you took Faith, too."

"Faith? Who is Faith? I've never had a Faith in my life."

"Things are not what they seem."

"They never are."

In a perfect imitation of Jay's voice he said, "All these years we were friends, and you don't know me."

He took off his mask.

I studied the face. Contours changing in the dim flickering. Who was he? Then something that sort of looked like Jay's face kept flashing through the spastic shadows. But Jay's face, kind of fuzzy, out of focus. Something weird had altered the features. Like wires under the skin. Or field surgery.

He rose up from the chair. Slowly. Weakly. He pulled off the red wig.

"I am Jay."

It was such a convincing imitation, that for a moment, I accepted it. Jay. Possessing someone. Who?

But then my head defaulted back to a rational explanation. "Iream. You're Iream, using disguises to fuck with my head."

"No, really. I am Jay."

He made a very convincing Jay.

No wonder you got so freaked out, Phoenix.

He said, "It was easy to move in on John Holmes. He was an empty house. A non-person. Changing identities all the time. Like a Lovehollow. Empty. Waiting for someone to take possession. Phoenix helped things along with her story. She gave him the role. You pushed it even more when you took his woman. Suddenly, we had a lot in common. I am Jay. Let me prove it to you by telling you something only Jay would know."

"Like what?"

"You believed that story Phoenix told you? You believed she slashed her wrists because I screwed her and told her about my disease. You believe the experience changed her forever, gave her religion, and she had been waiting for you take her back, and to forgive her. After all these years."

"Did Phoenix put you up to this?"

"I'm not the monster Phoenix tried to make me out to be. I never raped Phoenix. That night, she lied about being raped, and you, you dumb ass, threw me into a patch of needles that caused my death. Take that day I showed up in Hightstown. Okay, I tried to seduce her, like she said. I tried tears and hysterics, I tried threats and guilt. Shit, I even offered her money. We cried together. She told you that part right. We reminisced about the old days. But she wouldn't give in to me. No matter what I did. She said she was afraid, for my sake. She told me everything about her affair with you, Die. Everything, including lots and lots of

things she hid from you, Die. The truth comes out. She had been cheating on you. Lots and lots of times in Hightstown. Many other lovers. Just as you always suspected.

“She was convinced that she had contracted AIDS. Not from me, mind you. I tried to calm her down, but she wouldn't listen. She thought she had AIDS because she was fucking around on you every chance she got. It was a delusion, on account of guilt. That's why she tried to kill herself. That's who you've been eating your heart out over. Liar, whore. I once said she was a goddess, but she's a demon. All these years, that's who you've been in love with. A demon whore. That's who you sold out our friendship for.”

It seemed true. And I thought maybe it is something he knows because he really is Jay. And maybe it is something Phoenix confessed to him. But it felt like the truth. The long standing and hidden truth.

I said, "It doesn't matter. If you're telling the truth, if Phoenix really fucked around on me and lied, I forgive her. And if you're lying, making this up, then fuck you. If you're trying to break my heart before you do whatever it is you're planning, then fuck you again. It didn't work. Once I made a promise to Phoenix that I would always forgive her. No matter what happens. I broke that promise to her in the past, but I'll never break it again. I'll give her what I promised, what I have been stuck with all these years, though she didn't know it. Pure blinding love. Absolute love, in the deepest meaning of the word. That's what I feel for Phoenix. No matter how many lies it takes, no matter how many games we have to play.”

Now it was his turn to look confused. Disoriented. Like an actor when a role was finished, trying to figure out where he misplaced his identity. He said, "Didn't you come out here to

complete our swap? I'm sorry that I seem to shy of one woman, at the moment, but she took off. Maybe she will come back."

He hit me with my own lines. A kind of intimacy I didn't want with this stranger who probably was John Holmes, Iream Insider, and Mr. XXX. All of them together. And Jay Fortunata. Whoever he was, he knew me. He knew me inside and out. This was a show of how deep he had gotten into my head.

And I had this awful sense that I was dealing with a vastly superior mind. In a game with rules I couldn't understand. I said, "God, I'm sorry. I really am. Okay, I'll go along with your game. You're Jay, right?"

The best way to deal with Jay's games, or Iream's games, is to play along. The games usually don't stop until he thinks he's won. Until he's nabbed his goal. The whole thing had gotten too unreal for me. A trial by bullshit. Disorienting. A lucid dream. But the whole thing seemed to have been carefully constructed. Manipulated by an outside source. Like a well done scam.

I tried to figure out how to play his game. Read the clues. Find Phoenix. And Swan. Save us all.

I thought I saw something in this stranger that could be Iream Insider, and beneath I saw delinquent remnants of Jay Fortunata. But beneath all the masks, I saw someone older there. Insidious. Someone ancient, a victim.

"Where is Phoenix?"

Nothing felt real. It was a funny kind of shift of consciousness. Trying to make sense of it all. I was ready to believe anything.

"She was supposed to go to me, but she only wanted to go to Die. That's where she went. To the end she wanted. To go to Die. And my end is nothing." He opened his shirt. Revealing a black circle. A crust of blood just below the clavicle. He picked at

it tentatively.

"She shot you. She really did it."

"I all ready got my revenge."

I felt my heart stop. "You killed her."

He kept picking at the black circle on his chest. Suddenly the scab tore loose. Blood pumped from hole. At first, it shocked the hell out of me. And I thought, shit, what's keeping him going. Insanity? Dumb luck? Adrenaline?

Maybe just stage magic. Maybe he used a trick to fool you into thinking you had shot him, Phoenix.

Then live spiders began to crawl out of the pumping chest wound. If it was stage magic, it was a hell of an effect.

I sat there wishing for you to be alive. Wishing. I even started to pray. At that point, I felt like someone had unglued the atoms of my brain. I would have accepted whatever he asked of me, would have believed any lies, no matter how ridiculous. Anything at all, just so that you would still be alive.

He said to me, "Pay attention. I said, I already got my revenge."

"I heard you."

"You blew your line. Your line is, I hadn't noticed. Say, I hadn't noticed."

"I hadn't noticed."

"I killed you."

I laughed. Long. Hysterically. Mad, rushing gasps of laughter. The moment plunged me into depths of absurdity and terror so profoundly disorienting that I was laughing and trembling at the same time, that I thought I had gone mad.

On cue, I responded, "So I'm dead. What, like right now? None of this is real?"

"I've hunted you down just to let you know one thing... I'm

not going to hurt you. You are forgiven."

Now I was convinced. "Did Phoenix put you up to this? Just like old times. Not only does she lie to me all the time, she gets all my friends to tell her lies to me. Is this her idea of how to give me a religious experience? Haunt me with an old horror plot. Terrify me with a cheap device. Show me a holy ghost who says I am forgiven."

"So what does Phoenix mean to you?"

Was he trying to prove that he was really Jay by invoking all these words from my past? So that I would believe in magic. But they weren't Jay's lines that he was delivering. It was like a Miranda warning. Everything I had said was used against me.

"Everything. Absolutely everything. The only trouble is, with Phoenix, you don't know what is real and what isn't. She doesn't even know. And that's what's so terrible about her. But that's what's so entertaining. I'm almost to the point where I don't care if it's true, or real. I'm hooked on the way she lies. I don't want the real world anymore."

"I'll bet I could interest you in a swap." Spoken as if playing to unseen cameras. Like he had taken over the part of Director. It was his show.

"Not for anything. Not even for my life."

He smiled. It was Jay's old smile, when he's fucking with your head. "What if that is the only way you can be with her?"

"What?"

"Let me take your life."

"She's dead?"

"Give me your life, all of it. I can be you. You can be me. Give me your life. Your name. Your woman. Everything. Hold nothing back."

I knew just how Jay felt that night in Lovehollow. "This has

been a swapping scheme, all along. Whether you realize it or not. It's Phoenix's doing. Something she orchestrated and pulled you into."

"Let me take your life."

"If we swap lives and I am dead and you are me, then you'll be the one who has to keep the promise. You'll have to resurrect me." I felt a bond to this stranger. The bond shared by men who love the same woman. A bond to this stranger. And Iream. And Jay. Like we had all been consumed by you, Phoenix. All burnt up and remade in the same fire.

"Where will it end?"

I caught myself believing in the unbelievable. In the utterly ridiculous. Terrifying and funny at the same time. I might just as easily have been trapped inside my own skull, hallucinating on the chemical changes brought about by decay. Confronting myself.

I hesitate to tell you the next part, Phoenix. You might think that nothing would ever make me give up the life I have.

I said to him, "Go ahead. Take my life. It's yours."

I hesitate to tell you this because you might wonder if the life he took is the life I want to make with you. You might even think he wrote this letter. If I showed up on your doorstep and said I was John Holmes, just an ordinary law student kind of guy and not a famous porn star, would you love me like you love Dieter Smith?

He took my life.

Die Smiling died smiling, but lives on, played by someone who might be anyone at all. Reunited with the woman he loves, starring in the story of their lives.

I am telling you everything. So you will know what I have given up for you.

I'm coming for you, Phoenix. I'm coming.

I finally saw what you wanted me to see, and I finally believe

what you want me to believe. With a cheap horror plot. You got me to accept a ghost. You swallowed me in your tale.

Is it magic? A way to erase all the mistakes we made with each other. Start fresh. Go back to the beginning.

I love you enough to go mad with you. Play to your hallucinations. Reshape our world through by pretending. If that is the only way I can undo all the past mistakes. I love you enough to tell you any lies you want to hear just so we can be together. I love you enough to let go of my obsession of always telling the truth. I don't know what is real any more, to tell the truth. So that I have let you do what you wanted.

This is my end. I let you destroy me. I have to be with you. The only way I can live. I'm coming. Back to where we started.

At this point, I'm going to lay down my tool, my writing tool. Lay it down and let it lie. I'll walk up the stairs. I'll find you there, staring out the window. I'm going to put my hand on your shoulder, and you're going to say, "Don't touch me."

And I'm going to say, "I wish you and I had started differently."

And then we do it. We start all over again.

June 16, 1985

As Phoenix watches the Firebird drive off, her lower lip begins to tremble. Tears flow, not so much from fear, or sorrow, or shame, but from a deep sense of having gambled boldly, heavily, and with great conviction upon an utter mistake. Feeling stoned, drunk, stupid and humiliated, she suddenly notices Die's hand upon her shoulder, placed there for support and comfort.

He presses closer, bringing her skin against the grain of a fifty year old shark skin jacket.

"Don't touch me," she hisses.

"I wish you and I had started differently."

Her fingers tangle and twist her red hair, until her hands snag, caught fast. She pulls and screams, "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

"Are you talking to me?"

She sobers. "One for you. Three for myself."

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing, unless you have cigarettes."

Up the stairs she drifts; her ascension passes a gallery of skewed paintings, portraits of generations of slave owners, but only men. Locked within their frames, dressed in military regalia, these men, watch her accusingly, as if Jay were looking through their dead painted eyes. She feels Jay's eyes upon her, watching from a place unknown.

"My entire carton of cigarettes left with the Firebird-- along with everything else-- my man, my purse, my cash, my credit cards, my clothes, my money, my tampons. Even my toothbrush."

"I'm sorry."

"For the moment, the greatest loss I feel is for the cigarettes. Will you help me look around? Even a butt will do. I want to get out of here before Jay gets back."

"Jay won't come back."

"Yes he will. And he'll kill us both."

"Did he really rape you?"

"You wouldn't believe me, no matter what I said."

"I'll believe you, I promise, no matter what."

"Even if I lie?" Look, I'm getting out of here. Even if I have to hitchhike home."

"There's a bus stop in town. It's a twenty mile walk. Are you up for it? I'll go with you. If you want. I'm headed that way. I guess I should go looking for Jay. I should find him. I have to talk to him."

"He'll try to kill you, too. He has wanted to kill you for a long time."

"He's out there. Alone. In the darkness. Hurt. Don't you care?"

"You'll never find him. Fuck him. He's the one who ran off."

"I'll find him."

"Let him kill you, then. I've had it with both of you. I just want to go home."

"Go if you want to. Fine. I'm going to hunt for Jay. I'll drop you at the bus station. I'll even buy the bus ticket for you."

"I'll pay you back. I'll send the money."

"I even know where there are some cigarettes."

She softens. "Bless you, Dieter Smith."

He conducts her to a closet full of old clothes from the forties. Most are still crisp, only worn a few times. They would be in perfect condition, if not for the errant nibbling of moths and termites, and the hard black droppings of roaches and vermin which fall like wedding rice every time the racks are disturbed. Die opens a drawer in a Victorian vanity, and extracts a pack of Lucky Strikes. He tosses it to Phoenix.

She examines the unbroken foil. "Not usually a brand I care for, but one aptly named for the circumstances."

"God knows how long it has been there. Do you need a match?"

"At least Jay didn't run off with my lighter." She kindles the ancient tobacco. "Stale, but not bad." She takes a deep drag.

"Stale, but satisfying. Stale, but most welcome.

Tire tracks lead Phoenix and Die down a back woods road. As they walk, they find Jay's ragged trail. He marked his passage in ripped dirt, until he hit the tarmac of the interstate, where his trail was scorched. Deep streaks of rubber veer off toward a fork. Then the track of the Firebird vanishes.

Dust motes stream in the moon light. Die stares into the black on black of the highway. When a lone headlight begins to approach from the distance, Die looks relieved, as if it were only logical that Jay would come back this way at this time at the exact moment as he and Phoenix appeared.

Die tries to wave down the approaching car, but it whips past.

Speaking to himself, Die mutters, "Where do I go from here? What the hell am I supposed to do about Jay?"

She replies, "Let Jay do whatever the hell he wants to do. He'll do it anyway. If he's dead, let him be dead."

She wears a dead woman's tennis outfit, taken from the closet, fringed in the distinctive lace of grazing moths. She looks like old photographs of her mother. Also dressed for tennis of a by-gone age, Die nearly transcends his trailer park and roust-about heritage.

"I wish I could change the way things worked out," he says.

"Jay and I were headed for a break up, one way or another. I used you in an unfair fashion, pulled you into a conflict in which really had nothing to do with you. I hid behind you, to commit the unpleasant deed. This love affair, which endured little more than a year, has been dying of slow degrees; like a beast being pummeled to death-- at first it clings to life, maybe it even tries to fight back, but then it begins to enjoy the conflict, even the pain. It thrashes about for the longest time, its organs so charged with

agony it doesn't know it is dead. Next time I fall in love, I swear, I will go for the jugular at the first sign of failure."

"No. You have to work at love."

"How would you know?"

"Did Jay tell you I've never been in love?"

"He did. And I have insight."

"Well, I'm in love with you."

Phoenix rolls her eyes and reaches for another cigarette.

"How could we ever be together? I can't live in your reality. You can't live in mine."

"We will make up our own."

They walk on the highway, following the broken trail of dashes on the center lane. Bits of animals, bits of cars lie in the gutter.

Die finally says, "A few hours ago, when you proposed... you know what... my mouth just went dry. My heart was beating so fast, I thought I was going to pass out. That's why I just stood there and let you and Jay fight it out. I should have kept right on joking and broken the tension, and let the three of us laugh it off, but I froze. I guess I was hoping Jay would say yes-- even though I knew there was no way in hell."

"If Jay had said yes, I would have made the joke and called the whole thing off."

"I don't believe you."

"I'm not that easy. You think you can just wag your big cock at me, and cast 'come hither' looks in my direction? You think I'm going to fuck you for bus fare and a pack of cigarettes, and a half assed protestation of love?"

"How about if I buy you breakfast?"

They stroll into a two block area that passes for a town: a convenience store, a post office, a bus station, a Laundromat, a

restaurant and a hardware store. By this time, it is about four a.m. Light from the buzzing neon of a truck stop sign fills the streets with a glow that seems to be the distillation of uncountable churchless Sundays; it makes the town seem empty, morose, and haunted.

A pink neon sign flashes nervously, loud mouthed and self conscious, over the restaurant. It bears the strange name, "The Famous House of Shells. Never Closed." But part of the lights had burned out, so that it said, "Eamous House of Hell. ever lose." Another part of the sign said "Lobster Pound."

"So what is a lobster pound?" asks Die, "A home for lost lobsters?"

He holds open for Phoenix a swinging screened door.

Die asks, "Has a dark haired guy about my age come through here? His name is Jay Fortunata."

"The only Jay in here is a lobster."

Phoenix glanced continually at the door, afraid of who might enter. She gave a start every time the restaurant windows streaked with passing headlights; she shuddered at the rumble of each passing car.

"The bus station doesn't open for another hour."

"I'm hungry," said Phoenix. "I want the lobster named Jay."

Die and Phoenix examine the lobsters crawling lazily in a tank framed by cataract yellow glass. An army surplus pump, caked with decades of rust, emits a steady stream of bubbles. The lobsters dance provocatively with sea weed rhythms, unwittingly provoking appetite.

The bald, aproned man behind the counter, the owner or manager or attendant, extracts a lobster from the tank. The lobster named Jay. There is a fish hook embedded in its shell, like the letter J with a point.

"These are African lobsters," said the man. "I charge seven dollars a pound for African Lobsters to go, and an extra three dollars each if y'all want to eat them here." Holding the lobster by its active claws, the man uses it as a living diagram. "These two grabber things on top are full of tender meat. Very tasty," he says, "So is the tail. Then you suck out the meat inside the legs, and if you reach in the middle here, you can eat the insides. You wouldn't think the insides can be eaten cause of the way it looks. But the insides are very tender." He runs his finger along the lobster's belly, which must tickle because the tail curls upward. The lobster's eyes bitterly regard the spectators. Jay Fortunata seemed to watching from everywhere, from the void in which he had vanished. Jay seemed to be watching through the stalked eyes of his lobster namesake.

Die looks back at the tank. The curious lobsters paddle over to examine their examiner.

The next time we see the lobsters, they are red and boiled.

"Will that be for here or to go?" asks the man.

Die turns to Phoenix, "If we spend the extra six dollars to eat here, I won't have enough for your bus fare."

"To go," says Phoenix.

Along the road, she tries to read the signs left by many treads, searching for a trail that has special meaning for her, a set of hieroglyphs that turn and double back. They wander over to the bus station, where Die buys a ticket to Princeton. They settle down on a hard, splintering bench to dine upon shell fish and say good-bye.

The ticket-seller begins to shout from behind his cage. "God damn can't eat in here. What do you think this place is? A restaurant?"

"Give us a break," says Die.

"You can pay three bucks a piece -- the going rate to eat in this town."

"That's what the restaurant charges. You have less ambiance," says Phoenix.

"This place is a bus station, Ma'am. Don't want you eatin' in here no how."

He sends them out to their eternal moment, to the Laundromat. That is where they come.

Seated atop a green enameled washer, Die extracts the two deceased crustaceans from their white bag. He tests them with his fingertips.

"They're cold," he says.

"Let's heat them up." She grabs the lobsters from his hands and throws them into a near-by drier. "Give me a dime."

He flips a coin to her.

Shells rattle and crack as the lobsters spin in their hot air vortex.

"The butter is hard." He holds up two plastic containers capped with lids.

She grabs the containers from his hands and throws the butter in the drier as well.

Die says, "I'm saying good-bye to someone I don't know very well, but feel like I've known for ages. I'm not going to say that I love you again. It sounds too needy. I'm going to miss you, that's all. I'm really sorry you're leaving."

"I'm not. I can't wait to be gone."

"You know what I wish. I wish I could write with you. Maybe we could try to collaborate by mail."

She lights up a cigarette. "That's more intimate than sex."

"That's the idea; to break the loneliness. Aren't you lonely?"

She takes a hard drag on her cigarette. "Sometimes."

"I lost my best friend last night."

"And you can know no happiness but in the society of one with whom you can forever indulge the melancholy that has taken possession of your soul?"

"I fell in love with you. I promised Jay I wouldn't. I promised..."

"You didn't do anything wrong. This is all my fault. You and Jay will work it out, somehow, when he comes back."

At the rear of the store, a white form stirred. The far wall seemed to billow, waves of motion rolling over its surface. A lace canopy, just like the one in Lovehollow, had been draped over a clothesline. It hung as if waiting to dry, though it was dry all ready, and covered with dust. It was as dusty as the canopy in Lovehollow.

"Jay will never forgive me," says Die.

"Why not?"

"He knows I gave up looking for him when he was in trouble. He knows I'm going to take the thing he cares about most. He knows I'm going to betray him. Completely. He knows what is going to happen between us just as surely as if he doubled back and followed us the whole way. Just as if he were here in the shadows, watching. He knows."

"The only Jay here is the lobster."

"Well, let's put on a show."

He kisses her. She doesn't resist, returning a long, open, romantic kiss.

"I really don't want to deal with this," she says when she comes up for air. "I do not. I don't."

"At some point in our lives, we're going to have to deal with this thing between us. I'm not going to forget about you. I haven't figured out how I'm going to chase you if you go out the

door and get on that bus, but I will think of something. Why not get it over with?"

"On one condition..."

"I love you, I all ready said it."

"If things turn out badly, promise you'll forgive me. If I lie, if I betray you, with one man or a hundred, promise you'll forgive me."

"I promise."

"Even if I go back to Jay..."

"Yes."

"If I destroy your life, promise..."

"I'll forgive you. No matter what happens. I'll always forgive you."

"I'm not going to let you fuck me in exchange for some half hearted promise of a watered down version of love that's only fifteen proof. It has to be the real thing, pure, blinding, love. Absolute love, in the deepest meaning of the word, no matter how many lies it takes, no matter how many games we have to play. We sacrificed Jay so that we could have this moment. And if you don't give me what I demand, I will sacrifice you, and sacrifice myself. Do you understand me?"

He stares at her, bewildered, frightened, but unable to back away.

"All right," she says, shrugging. "Let's get it out of our systems and proceed with our lives." She crushes out her burning Lucky on the green enamel.

Die and Phoenix fall upon an enormous cushion of abandoned laundry; a bed of silk scarves, chiffons, and decorated panties.

Die makes love just like Jay. He leads Phoenix into an easy, familiar rhythm. She had rehearsed this first coupling hundreds of

times in Jay's arms. Perhaps the origin of this similarity between Die and Jay stems from a shared karmic identity, the source of his friendship in the first place. Perhaps it is because Die and Jay had both been trained by a number of the same women. The two of them spent most of their time talking about sex and comparing notes, and perhaps it was that.

Time falls in and out of joint, an expanse of silken, curvilinear rigidity. Through extraordinary affinity or instinct, they know how to move to one another, like dancers of honed artistry, balancing improvisation and tradition. It is as though his touch has revived some primordial and dormant organ of sense... like the ampulla of Lorenzini that alerts the shark to the organic electricity of his sustenance.

His hips rotate in synchronicity with hers, to the rhythm of gaudy swirls of color and pattern, spinning in the dryer windows, in sync with the wet rainbows churning on a hard axis in an open washer. Sloshing eruptions of sea foam cascade around them. Their limbs tangle together, bound by scarves and velvets, laces and taffeta garters.

The quirky structure of their odd and wayward union drives away distractions and focuses full attention on the wonderment of what is happening-- the augmentation of all that is missing within themselves, the ingredients of a higher potential.

The lobster named Jay spins in a circular journey, trapped in the burning air, forced to watch until a spurt of hot butter smears the drier window.

Two white hands grab the dusty lace canopy hazy sheet draped over the clothesline in the rear of the store. Suddenly, the canopy seems to fling itself across the room, as if revealing a secret with a conjurer's gesture. The sheet billows toward the couple, then lands in a cascade upon them, like a parachute at journey's

end. It shakes onto them all the dust and poisons that had built up over time. They vanish within the cloud.

Phoenix screams. Then her voice drops to a whisper. "Don't move. Don't."

As the dust congeals, black flecks appear; splattered across two bodies, as if someone has whipped a fountain pen in their direction. The lace sheet had yielded a precipitate of dust. Dust. And something else that had been up there for a very long time.

At least three of the splatter shapes are caught in Die's hair. They struggle there, caught in dark knots, wriggling the crimson hour-glass markings on their bellies.

Die cranes his head around, searching the shadows. "Jay? Are you there? Don't do this to us... help us..." But there is no answer.

She is afraid to speak; afraid to move; afraid to even tremble. Twenty or more black widow spiders scurry like contagion over Die, an animated pox, tracing cursive patterns in the dust.

"Jay?"

No answer.

"I won't let go of her, Jay. No matter what. You can't make me let go. And if you can see us..."

His eyes glaze with unreadable emotion.

Running footfalls patter through the Laundromat. Shadows scurry. Is it someone arriving or departing? Outside, the ignition of a car turns over with a familiar stammer. It sounds as if Jay has decided to leave them to their fate, but it feels as if he still lingers. It feels as if he is staring at them.

Die's gluteus muscles tense and constrict. Die and Phoenix look like statues of themselves, dusted, like angels, mating upon a cloud. Droplets of sweat trace veins of marbling over their skin.

He does it to her again, a glacial push, while the widows

explore their new territory, searching for their rent webs. Nothing will make him let go. She moans and weeps, and he continues to love her again and again, slowly, patiently, bravely, as venom scampers over them. An extraction of his entire length is followed by a slow stab down to the hilt-- each stroke taking a full minute. The widows comb through follicle jungles; over cheeks, over breasts, up and down legs, pacing the steady rhythms of their gigantic hosts. Their touch is as soft as the wind.

She feels little stabs of intoxicating poison. Giddy, drunk on venom, she begins to lose all sense of identity. She feels that Jay is near by, still following her, a part of her. She can almost smell him. She feels his eyes upon her as she drifts off to a different kind of existence. He has brought her to this end, and he can watch it if he wants. She is with exactly who she wants to be with in her ultimate moment.

He says, "Take my life. Twist it to your own end."

"No..." she cries. "No... not yet." Light, like a candle invades her, its illumination flooding her interior, a hot point of wetness, and a dribble like molten wax.

"I'm not finished, he whispers. He holds firm, riding the whirlwind he has sown. It happens again and again. They endure, transformed like angels, not they themselves, but the idea of them, naked to the world, their mortal portions eaten away, their moment preserved, their flick. Their story is an old one, and not unique. But the story belongs to them, as does the moment, whether they are engaged through their senses, or through memory, or through surrogates.

It will never end between Die and Phoenix, whether they survive or not, even if there is nothing left of them but an obscene film, their outlaw ghosts laid to rest, together.

FINIS.