

## BEND THIS PAGE

Before the films burned, I carried them back and forth to the hospital with me. There was something healing—I swear it, my darlings—in the violet light from the projector, in my image, shuddering on the screen at the foot of my bed. I would sit for hours, the chemo bag hovering above me, the catheter stiff with its urgent message, and see myself whole again.

Who would have dreamed, dear tidbits, that the very films which destroyed me professionally would later give me such private consolation? Certainly not I. Wrestling my way into contraptions like the leather harness I wore for *Siren Song*, I could hardly be expected to feel anything but pain. Large, hardware-studded straps bound my breasts, forcing them up and out, when what they craved in their twilight was to droop luxuriously, to hang like ripe fruit. The same straps snaked behind my back, then wrapped around my hips and between my legs, a double-cross that would have done the Marquis de Sade proud.

My thighs may have chafed at the time, but *Siren* and the other box office disasters came to mean everything to me. Their picture of health, their cheerful illusion of lust soothed me when I needed it most, calmed and fortified me even as the tumor was roto-rooting my gut.

At home, each time the cramps became unbearable, I would drag myself, cradling my swollen abdomen like a colicky child, to the screening room. There, a pillow folded into one of the velvet seats, I drank up those long limbs, that nimbus of wild, bleached hair. I marveled at the tempting, parted lips and yelled with the vixen on the screen, "You may do what you want with my body, but you will never have my heart!"

That was before the fire last week. I was away from home, so only my better half was destroyed -- along with the screening room, the guest cottage and two-thirds of the main house. I combed through the rubble afterwards, but couldn't find so much as a film canister. The man from the insurance company told me the stuffing in the plush seats had acted like a fuel, feeding the flames, kindling a heat that boiled metal.

And so, sweet meats, I am no longer immortal. My beautiful youth, or its approximation, is ashes. Nothing stands between me and the abyss. Nothing except my hound-eyed oncologist and this journal. I've been scribbling away on tablets the nurses give me. Every page is topped with one of the seven warning signs of cancer: #1 - A CHANGE IN BOWEL OR BLADDER HABITS.

Though I've come to letters late in life, I seem to be making up for lost time. Even on this, the morning of what Dr. Cameron calls my "procedure," I am crouched over a little pad, writing furiously. It is as though these notes to you have taken the place of the old films. As though, washed, shaved and naked under a backless gown, I can still call up the star I was, make you see her, make you want her again. And if, reading my words, you tremble, if you put down this page and clap your hands, together we may yet revive poor old Tinker Belle.

Another page, another sign of cancer: #2 - A SORE THAT DOES NOT HEAL. What I am writing now may be a very short story, ginger snaps, or the first chapter of a novel. It all depends on the outcome of the operation Dr. Cameron took considerable pains to explain to me last night. He lumbered into my room with a little plastic model and took it apart, like a puzzle, on my bed. "Now, then," he said, yanking at a prune-colored piece that came away with a startling snap, "let's look at your cervix, shall we?"

I scribbled while he talked. I let him think I was taking notes, when in fact I was writing to you. Dr. Cameron is a large man, his red hands swiped the sheets like beef chops. He had trouble separating one of the pieces from his model and ended by pointing to it where it hid behind the blue tail of the colon. He nodded solemnly, using words like "invasive," "neoplastic," and my favorite, "debulking."

I'm afraid that's all I can remember. I confess I have a tendency to ignore the good doctor when he turns professorial. He's well-intentioned, bits, but carried away with being surgeon to the stars. He listens to himself when he talks, convinced that whatever he says to me will find its way into print, or be broadcast to an anxious public hungry for news of Sable DeWitt. A rather rosy view, considering that neither you nor the press have given a damn about me since *A Kiss for Luck*.

That was the last film that paid for itself; the movies I made with the Ambassador, the ones that consumed themselves last week, played to empty theatres for the length of their brief runs. They were so bad that all the major studios turned them down, forcing the Ambassador to start his own production company. So bad that one critic revised his rating scale to include a scoreless "black hole" at its bottom end.

#3 - UNUSUAL BLEEDING OR DISCHARGE. So why did I aid and abet those abortions? Why did I strap and buckle and glue myself into ever more humiliating costumes? I suggest, my treasures, that you too would have surrendered to the wistful, menopausal splendor of the Ambassador's delusions. Whose heart is so jaded it would not have been moved at the sight of my jowly, balding mate in his Francis Ford Copula outfit? At the way he paced the set, whispering commands in his Ivy League sotto voce, shirt open

at the neck, black boots carrying him forward at a constant tilt, as if he were commiserating with his pinched toes?

Unfortunately, my trials went well beyond torturous costumes. How I girded myself, how I shuddered inwardly each time the Ambassador interrupted a take, each time he laid aside his clipboard and put both moist hands on my bare shoulders. "Sable," he would say, "this is where I need your demure side." He would look deeply, knowingly into my eyes. "Before she meets the Count, Isabel is a naive peasant. Your motivation here is hunger, not lust."

Motivation! Imagine that doddering diplomat lecturing me on motivation—me, who made more than thirty movies while he was bowing from the waist and learning to say "due consideration" in five languages. But the man's presumption knew no bounds, and once he actually grabbed me by the waist, changing places with me so that I could study his interpretation of a role. He struck my pose, repeated my line in a high-pitched whinny intended to be our heroine's voice. "My Lord," he recited, sounding like a walk-on in a grade-school play, "I am at your disposal, body and soul."

Heaven knows from what literary trash heaps he retrieved those elaborately plotted, gruesomely written scenarios. But you can imagine the foreboding with which, at an age when most former femmes fatales are scrambling for character parts, I took on challenges like *Destina*, the story of an orphan who rises to corporate stardom by marketing her perfume and her body. Or *Firebrand*, a film that turned Annie Oakley into a nymphomaniac who threw herself with equal vigor at cowboys and cattle.

#4 - THICKENING OR LUMP IN THE BREAST OR ELSEWHERE. "Dearest," I would tell the Ambassador, trying to return his latest script, passing it back with what I hoped seemed

more like humility than revulsion. "I'm afraid I could never do this role justice. It should go to someone younger, a luscious strumpet."

"There is no strumpet more luscious than you," my gallant husband would insist. He might have added, of course, that no one else in her right mind would even consider those ruinous parts. So, like it or not, I was the star of every maddeningly inept Rothstein-DeWitt production. And, hit or not, the Ambassador cherished each one, watching them over and over in our private screening room. "This is no simple romance, Sable of mine," he would say, a lather of excitement on his brow and cheeks. "It's the exploration of a universal conflict between our desire to submit and our will to prevail."

Until the day he died, my husband continued to defend the artistic integrity of the borderline pornography in which he starred me. He never took off those ridiculous boots, never flagged in his belief that the empty theatres, the cruel reviews, my moribund career were all preliminaries to the universal acclaim that was our ultimate reward. I trust *he* has come to some reward by now, poor dear. As for my career? It never recovered from the blows he dealt it.

#5 - INDIGESTION OR DIFFICULTY IN SWALLOWING. So I am trying to reclaim you now, darlings, to win back the audience I lost. Here, prepared like an Aztec maiden for ritual sacrifice, I write you propped at a fiendish angle. From the hall, an orderly wheels a stretcher into my room, and standing at the foot of the bed, a nurse readies a hypodermic with suspicious crispness. (She will not look at me, cherubs. She has turned her back to me, hiding her bright needle.)

So we must work quickly, you and I. I must write, and you must read. Before they take the knife to me, you must carry me away, whisk me off their astringent-smelling altar.

There is no time for cautious courtship, tender foreplay. Tinker Belle's light is a fading S.O.S., winking feebly as a firefly in fall.

Did you miss me, best beloveds? It's been several minutes since I was forced to stop writing, to stuff your notes under my mattress. The nurse, you see, overcame her diffidence long enough to give me a mildly insulting shot in the rump. Now she and the orderly, having undone the straps of the gurney, are conferring in the hall. Sly and desperate, I drag my my pen across this page, wandering into large, unmanageable loops. Still, I am heady with the thought that long after the operation, perhaps long after I am making penicillin underground, you will read me as I was.

Forget that I am rotting from the inside out, my flesh sunken against my vitals. Forget that my eyes tear constantly, that my face is dry and juiceless as an ancient lemon. Remember, instead, the small child with a perfect mouth, profound creamy eyes like a lake at dusk; the little white-haired girl whose mother you kept stopping -- in stores, on playgrounds, even on the bus. "What a beautiful child," you would tell my mother, over and over until she knew I was a monster. "Have you taken her to a talent scout?" you asked. "Have you thought about movies?" Over and over, until she did.

I wasn't Sable De Witt then, I was Patricia Ann Houten, a cooperative, quiet child embarrassed by the distinction of my beauty, by the way you were always cupping my chin, talking to me, touching me. "You're too pretty for words," you would tell me, "just too pretty for words." I didn't have anything to tell you back. I didn't even know your name.

#6 - OBVIOUS CHANGE IN A WART OR MOLE. You needed me from the beginning, you see. And your need became my mirror, the only place I saw myself, day after day, role

after role. At first, my mother went with me to the studio, standing anxiously at the fringes of the sound stage, tripping over wires, unwrapping aromatic sandwiches.

But one day the producer asked her not to come anymore. He told her they would send a car for me instead, and every day from then on, a long, purring limo picked me up in front of our house. Soon, in a matter of months, Patricia Ann Houton disappeared. In her place, Sable DeWitt, sprung from your devotion, forged in the cauldron of your love, left her mother, her dresser with pink bunnies painted on the drawer pulls, and a life whose rhythms were slow and regular as sleep.

"Sable sizzles!" "New star on the horizon!" "DeWitt's a bomb -- a sex bomb!" The reviews for *Last Chance* brought you to me by the hundreds, then by the thousands. You begged me for autographs. You haunted my hotel, the restaurants where I ate. You stole pillowcases I'd slept on, napkins stained with my lipstick, buttons, strands of hair, food from my trash. You stalked me patiently, relentlessly, and the more you dreamed of me, the more beautiful I grew.

Take Three: The nurse and orderly stopped flirting long enough to lift me onto the stretcher, but now I am alone again. Alone and very dizzy, my angels. The tablet, tangled in my bed sheets, took me forever to retrieve. But I need to write you about Scott Fallon. Do you remember my co-star in *Warm Front*? How tall he was? Lean and dark, with sinister, hooded eyes and the sort of wounded half-smile that draws women for miles. You adored him; you adored us together. In *Warm Front*, I played a paralyzed dancer, and in the final scene, Scott lifts me from my bed and whirls me around the room to the procession theme

from Swan Lake. "I'll be your legs, darling," he tells me tenderly. "We will be partners forever."

In real life -- can you bear it, loves? -- our dialogue was somewhat different. "Hey, Babe," my leading man said when I told him I was pregnant, "we ain't going to the chapel just because you forgot what time of month it was." At close range, Scott was hardly the sensitive, tortured soul he appeared on screen. He sucked his spaghetti, called everyone "Babe," and took fewer showers than anyone I've ever known.

But if my co-star didn't stick to the script, I followed it slavishly. "I don't care what *you* do," I told him. "I'm having this baby." (I knew what you'd want me to say, you see. I knew how brave and principled you dreamed I was.)

"And how will that make *me* look, huh?" Poor Scott was genuinely bewildered, stretched beyond his capacities by view points other than his own. "I mean, what exactly do you figure that's going to do to my image?"

"Hey, Babe," I told him. "I couldn't care less."

There should be a chain of tiny stars here—to signify still another interruption. This time, they wheeled the stretcher out of the room and pulled it onto an elevator. I slipped the tablet under my bruised hip, then spent the ride staring up into strange faces, sagged with gravity and concern. I was wheeled off at basement level, then left to lose consciousness in this drafty room. Cold lights are bouncing off chrome and steel. My legs and arms are turning numb, but I roll over and pull the tablet from under me.

You wrote me letters during my pregnancy. Hundreds and hundreds of letters, telling me how brave I was, how you admired me for placing the sanctity of life above my



career. You wrapped trinkets in the envelopes, sent me packages of baby clothes and blankets and silver spoons. But most of all you chose names for the baby. Boys' names like Cedric and Garth and Lyle and Sherman. Girls' names like Estelle and Ashley and Morgan and Lucinda.

I didn't name my baby until she was dead. And then none of your names were right. You'd sent me saucy names like Brandy, sweet ones like Taffy, elegant ones like Justine. They didn't belong to my little still-born daughter, to the tiny, wrinkled girl who smelled like dead flowers on the side of a vase. I called her Camille. She was supposed to be a happy ending. I don't want to write about her anymore.

I made movies with a vengeance then. Some were good, some were bad, but none approached the low watermark to which I sank when I allowed myself to get involved with the elderly, tuxedoed suitor who dogged my every step after *Silent Heart*.

#7 - NAGGING COUGH OR HOARSNESS. The Ambassador showed then, I suppose, the same persistence, the same oblivious tenacity that had earned the praise and gratitude of two Presidents. Afterward, when I learned who he was, I found pictures of him in old newspapers, photos of a tall, square-chinned figure striding down barricaded streets, meeting with bearded guerillas, boarding rust-covered bi-planes at the end of jungle runways.

Quite simply, the man knew no fear. He was thick-skinned and arrogant, with an effete, slender nose that quivered when he was on the scent. He wasn't at all what we'd dreamed of, pigeons, but he wouldn't go away. Stepping across my path outside the studio, waiting with flowers at my hotel, sitting at the table next to mine in clubs -- there was no end to him. And to his wearisome, heavy-handed devotion.

"I will not live without you, Miss DeWitt," he told me early in our one-sided courtship. "I am too old and too rich not to get what I want." I laughed at the time, unfastening a pearl-and-diamond brooch he'd pinned to my breast. "And I, Mr. Ambassador," I told him, "am too young and too beautiful to even consider spending my life with you."

We were married in a small civil ceremony. And if an old warhorse isn't a stallion, he is good for nose-rubbing, for quiet grazing, haunch to haunch. We became fast allies, he and I, reading each other's whims from across a room, gossiping, staying home for long weekends, sprawled in a nest of newspapers and take-out food cartons. Content.

Which is why, years later when you abandoned me, dumplings, when you left me alone in the wake of those pathetic films, I survived. I even learned to cook, began to share the Ambassador's fascination with bonsai. Sometimes, inhaling my red pepper pesto, or bracing a tiny, gnarled limb with florist's wire, I wondered if it hadn't all been for the best. If those black-hole movies hadn't been instruments of providence, to bring me back to an earlier time, a slow and dreamy life I'd forgotten. A contained, unexamined peace.

But then my good companion died, felled by a heart attack that left him upright in his lounge chair, mouth half open, eyes widened in surprise. I was abandoned again, alone with the old movies and a tumor that whispered to me in the dark. "I claim your cervix," it whined. "Your ovaries are mine. They are like columbines, swollen, seductive. And I am a bee, sucking, sucking." Nothing would stop the pain, my lambs, nothing I could do or swallow or inject.

Still the movies helped. That shady baggage who went up in flames last week was my salvation. Crouched under the projector's stuttering light, redeemed by her painted

beauty, I was equal to the struggle. "You'll never have me!" she and I yelled together.

"Rough hands will not take from me what a gentle kiss would yield."

Now, lambs, you must carry that lovely strumpet off with you, read her back to life. Only a minute ago, Dr. Cameron peered down at me from a great height. Behind him, I saw a gloomy man fill a second syringe. They have disappeared again, but I can hardly write, my jewels. The world is spinning and I need to sleep.

I promise, though. Even under clover and onion grass, I will feel your love. Read my cheekbones, not shadowed and lost, but plump with youth. Read my hair, not thinned by chemo, but rich and full, the color of desire. Read my breasts and hips, round with longing, waiting for your touch. I am not more beautiful than you can imagine, but exactly that beautiful.

Soon they will come back. The nurse will hold out a stiff, forbearing hand, ask me to surrender my tablet. They will give me another shot, and tell me to count backwards. *Seven*, I will say, twirling away from them toward you. I am dancing even now, stamping and wild, my body a flame. Can you see me? *Six*, I will whisper, lost to the music, turning. Already my hair falls over one eye, my skin shines with perspiration and my legs flash like rain on sea grass. *Five*, I am whirling faster now, so fast I leave you behind. *Four*, you stumble after me, breathing heavily, stiff with need. *Three*, you reach out, fold me laughing against you. *Two*, we are falling together, swept under a dark, foam-headed wave. We are *One* now, you and I. Mark me, my precious morsels. Bend this page. Bite the corner off. No one will see you. Devour me. Swallow me whole.