

Each week, Sunday Reader features an original work of short fiction or poetry by a Southern writer.

# Dear Joaquin Phoenix

BY REBECCA LANNING

I'm writing to you from the Target parking lot in Garner, N.C., to warn you of a lawsuit being filed against you by my estranged husband Dwayne who's pure-T jealous of you and the Oscar you're gonna win for your portrayal of the Man in Black which was, for want of a better word, heart-smashing. (Dwayne would call it marriage-wrecking.)



## REBECCA LANNING

was born in Newport News, Va., in 1962. Her father, Tate, is a consulting civil engineer; her mother, Michael, is a homemaker. A graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill, Lanning earned a Master of Arts degree in English at N.C. State University, where she taught composition and fiction writing. A former magazine editor, she works as a freelance writer and tutors students with reading disabilities. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in a variety of publications. She lives in Wilmington with her husband, Frank Godwin, and their sons, Will and Tate.

What happened is Mama said she'd watch the twins for me and Dwayne to get away over Thanksgiving. My boys are 9 and easy as pie. I had them young, so don't think I'm some shriveled housewife vacuuming up Legos and cooking suppers full of meat or meat by-products. For the record, I've cooked a meatloaf or two but I'm vegan now. Come to think of it I read on the World Wide Web that you're vegan too! Dwayne don't believe me when I say I can't eat animals, that I picture their poor faces, their wet eyes, and lose my appetite. He thinks it's your face, your eyes (which are spectacular) that I picture as I serve the boys meatless Spaghettios. They're both nicknamed Joaquin now, not because of you, I just like the name, plus I heard that skinny runt Kelly Ripa named her baby Joaquin so I figure having two named Joaquin would show her she don't have a patent on the idea.

If you knew me, which would never happen since you're famous and I'm a regular person (although once in the Orlando airport someone mistaked me for Courtney Cox), you'd know I used to be the assistant art teacher at the junior high until the twins were born and Dwayne begged me to stay home and hired me to pick out paint and what-not for the tract houses he was building but I guess the cornflower walls and aqua countertops I chose was too vivid and he fired me and went with neutral everything. The lyrics to the song "It Ain't Me, Babe" come to mind, which you sing so well with Reese on the CD I used to keep under the seat of my Camry till Dwayne found it. He said if I liked that music so much I ought to buy the real thing with Cash and Carter and not some pretenders who can't half carry a tune. I said you could win a Grammy in addition to a Oscar and Dwayne smashed the CD on the driveway right there in front of Joaquin and Joaquin. (That's why I'm at Target buying another CD and if he smashes this I'll buy another so all his smashing's gonna do is drive up sales.)

As I was saying, Dwayne's working long hours jump-starting his construction business and Mama thought we needed to go off just the two of us, so right after Thanksgiving (I'll tell you up-front I ate a slice of turkey but I'm a to-furkey girl all the way now) Dwayne and I checked into the Days Inn off I-85 and the minute our suitcases hit the floor Dwayne was pawing me but that's as far as it went. I didn't want Dwayne to feel bad so I said why don't we go see "Walk the Line" at the cineplex across the highway. I saw Oprah the other day when you and Reese were on (I don't watch her show, I just was walking by the TV as she was telling everybody to go see the movie, not that I do something just because Oprah says to). Dwayne don't care for movies but went to save face I reckon more than to make me happy which has never been a priority of his, oth-

erwise why would he have talked his lawyer friend Kyle the Sleaze into suing you?

Well, I never blinked a single time when you were on the screen. I'm not like those women who go on about Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp or Tom Cruise before he jumped around on Oprah's furniture like he don't have no sense (that was the one other time I watched Oprah). They got nothing like the talent that God (or Buddha or whatever, I'm open about these things) has blessed you with, the way you burn up the screen, the whole world rolling up, good and bad, joy and heartache, snowfalls and starving people, until there's just you teaching everybody who's watching what it means to be alive.

Well I better get in there and get my CD before they sell out but I'll finish up first. After the movie I asked Dwayne what did he think and he said it was all right. ALL RIGHT?! I knew then it was over between us. That night I laid there and cried till my pillowcase and my hair (which is dark brown) was sopping wet. The next morning Dwayne got a page about a busted waterline in one of his monochromatic tract houses and we left to get Joaquin and Joaquin at Mama's. She spoils them with Gameboys which they're playing with, and I'm like them with the computer looking things up about you.

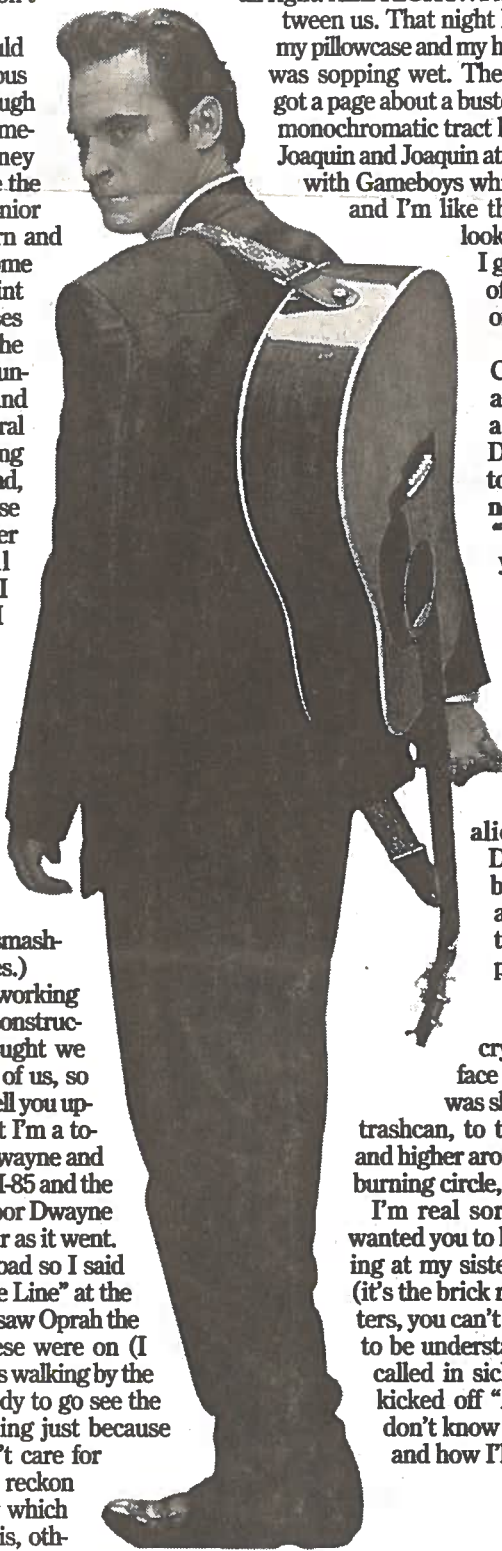
I got a folder with pictures of you that I downloaded off the World Wide Web.

Well, one night after Christmas I woke up from a dream calling your name and that's what sent Dwayne over the edge. I told him I certainly was not saying "Joaquin" but "Why kin," as in "Why kin you not be sweet to me?" and he bolted out of bed and tore up your pictures and threw them in the trash and lit a match and tossed it in there too and said you'd stolen my love (later Kyle gave him the fancy name for it, alienation of affection).

Dwayne bent over me, his breath like a slab of ribs, and told me to choose between you and him. I pulled the covers to my neck and watched your pictures burn. I was crying hard and Dwayne's face was sweaty and my arm was shaking as I pointed to the trashcan, to the flames rising higher and higher around the edges, forming a burning circle, a ring of fire.

I'm real sorry about all this but I wanted you to know the truth. I'm staying at my sister's over on Maco Road (it's the brick ranch with the blue shutters, you can't miss it) and she's trying to be understanding. She told me she called in sick after Constantine got kicked off "American Idol" but she don't know what I'm going through and how I'll always be ...

Eternally yours,  
Belinda P. Dawkins



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