

LIKE A PHOENIX

a screenplay by

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ORGAN MUSIC, A SOLEMN FUNERAL DIRGE

FADE IN:

INT. FUNERAL PARLOR - DAY

One thousand FLOWERS engulf an open casket. MOURNERS in the background SOB. The organ MUSIC rises to a crescendo then, SILENCE. From the back of the room, a LOUD MANLY BURP breaks the atmosphere. Everyone turns back to look. FRANK, a man dressed in black, stands by the double doors, hiding a beer can. The stares send him further into the lobby.

UP FRONT, two boys, BOBBY, ten, and THOMAS, thirteen, sit next to an empty chair. They turn to look at each other. Thomas shakes his head. Bobby shrugs his shoulders.

FADE TO:

CLOSE ON CASKET wobbling along a conveyor belt. UP AHEAD, a tunnel, darkness, the ROAR OF A FIRE. The flames lap up and devour the casket. The fire brightens, turns WHITE.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE SUN - DAWN

TILT DOWN TO A SIGN AT THE SIDE OF A FREEWAY -- It's the SEAL OF THE CITY OF PHOENIX, featuring a stylized black bird rising out of a fire. To the right of it, and beyond, a valley of red tile roofs sprawls toward the desert and mountains. The sun burns the haze.

CUT TO:

INT. A TWO CAR GARAGE

A shaft of light breaks through a side window. A series of mirrors bounce it back and forth into a small magnifying glass that reduces it all to a hot pinpoint. This burns the surface of a tightened rubber band.

A LITTLE SMOKE AND SNAP

The rubber band flies off. This releases a lever which throws a switch that starts a HUMMING. It's the sound of a TOY TRAIN which now pulls out of a miniature station and winds its way around a complete western village -- Phoenix in the Old West. The TRAIN blows a tiny WHISTLE, meanders through and ducks into a tunnel.

CUT TO:

EXT. BACK YARD

The TRAIN emerges from the shadows of a gangly bush TOOTING its WHISTLE. The badly overgrown yard is littered with abandoned footballs and baseballs, an old tennis racket, a rusted workout bench and barbells. The TRAIN curves along a wobbly wooden fence, behind a beat-up swing set, through what once were elaborate flower beds, and CHUGS by ABANDONED ROSE BUSHES gone to seed. The tracks lead the TRAIN through a DOGGIE DOOR, back into the kitchen.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN & DINING ROOM

There's no room left at the breakfast table for another dirty dish. The sink is buried under a mountain of breakfasts, lunches and dinners long gone stale. An extensive collection of used pizza cartons is stacked in a corner, with a sign taped above it: "The Leaning Tower of Pizza." The TRAIN TOOTS through.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

This once suburban showplace is now in dire need of vacuuming and polish. There's debris everywhere: beer cans, baseball mitts, comic books, crumpled clothes, Sports Illustrated, then . . .

RAILROAD TRACKS? The TRAIN comes out from under the couch, dodges a soccer ball and a bag of pretzels and hurries out.

CUT TO:

INT. STAIRCASE

The TRAIN tilts up to climb the stairs. It's not an easy hill but this TRAIN thinks it can, it thinks it can, it thinks it can. About half-way up, it's "cowcatcher" scoops up a pair of dirty socks. Dragged down by this added weight, it now doesn't think it can, it doesn't think it can.

CUT TO:

INT. LANDING AND UPSTAIRS HALL

It makes it over the top at last and runs directly into MURKY, a shaggy, brown mutt who's fallen asleep right over the tracks. The TRAIN BLOWS IT'S WHISTLE at him. He wakes with a little YELP, GROWLS at the TRAIN, picks up the socks and gets out of the way. The train moves on.

(CONTINUED)

Murky goes to the bathroom and drops the sock on a mountain of clothes next to an overstuffed hamper. He settles down on the rug with a WHIMPER.

CUT TO:

INT. THOMAS' ROOM

Long and lanky, THOMAS fell asleep last night still wearing his glasses and clothes, a pile of books at his side. The walls of his room are posterized with his passions: Einstein, the space shuttle, Madonna.

His eyes flutter open in time to see The TRAIN enter his room, climb up to his bed and arrive at his pillow, there to ring a buzzer. He yawns, sits up, then throws a switch, releasing the train. It now curves back around, down and out of the room.

CUT TO:

INT. BOBBY'S ROOM

That's exactly what a sign on his door says. Every sports franchise associated with Phoenix or Arizona has a shrine here. BOBBY is athletic and well built. The TRAIN arrives bedside, bumps right into a stack of discarded GAMES magazines and blows the WHISTLE.

With robotic numbness, Bobby reaches down, lifts the magazines just long enough for the TRAIN to pass, then drops them.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM

FRANK, disheveled, mid thirties, is face down, dead to the world. The TRAIN CHUGS in, up onto his bed, and reaches its final destination: the empty pillow next to Frank. It blows its WHISTLE. Frank springs up and GROANS -- no, GROWLS. If he'd clean up his act, people would notice he's handsome.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Bobby helps himself to some Wheaties. Thomas makes coffee. Frank pops opens a can of beer and rummages through the fridge for leftover pizza. Thomas hands him a stack of mail, long neglected.

BOBBY

You gotta see her sooner or later,
Dad -- just to get a load of those
bazookas.

(CONTINUED)

THOMAS
He's a leg man.

BOBBY
She's got legs too . . .

ALL THREE IN UNISON
. . . all the way up to her ass.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

Frank fixes his tie while talking into the hall phone. The boys kick a soccer ball around the room.

BOBBY
Scoot, Murky! Higher, higher with the knee.

THOMAS
Can't.

BOBBY
You ain't gonna learn nothing.

THOMAS
Anything. It is impossible to not learn nothing.

They kick the ball back and forth, knocking over several valuable knickknacks. Frank is oblivious.

FRANK
(into phone)
Fifteen hundred PZ-107 shoulder pads went waybill D-45816733. The PB-203 crotch cups went standard.

Suddenly he freezes as he sees the boy's soccer ball bounce off a wall and land on the mantle where, in slow-mo horror, it knocks over A LARGE CHINESE TAKE-OUT CONTAINER.

The boys stop dead in their tracks, CRINGE.

The mood is now abruptly changed, somber. Frank drops the phone, rushes over to the dented box. CHUNKY, GRAYISH POWDER spills out of it. The boys look on in shame as Frank scoops what he can back into the box. He tries to control his anger.

BOBBY
Sorry, Dad.

THOMAS
My fault.

(CONTINUED)

FRANK

You both could have been more careful.

BOBBY

You said you'd take care of it months ago.

Thomas nudges Bobby to shut up. Frank tenderly closes the container and looks around as if for a safe spot to place it. Now he carefully leads it out of the room.

CUT TO:

INT. GARAGE, LAUNDRY AREA

Frank enters cradling the box and searches the place. He spots a cabinet, clears out a shelf and hides it way behind some paint cans and rags. He takes one last, sad look, then solemnly closes the door.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOUSE

The boys rush out to the cul-de-sac. Too late. The SCHOOL BUS drives off HONKING its HORN. They slam their books down.

CUT TO:

EXT. BARRY GOLDWATER JUNIOR HIGH - DAY

This is an adobe ranch, landscaped in gravel and cactus. It all looks brand spanking new, because it is.

CUT TO:

INT. JULIE DAVIDSON, COUNSELOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Institutional beige walls have been livened up a bit with colorful prints of AIDA, LA TRAVIATTA and CARMEN. JULIE, early thirties, holds a ready stopwatch at her desk. Outside a born bureaucrat, inside she's really warm and affectionate -- and has a body that kills. A STUDENT across her desk stares intently at a pile of small red and white puzzle blocks.

JULIE

(clicks stopwatch)

Go.

The Student madly rearranges the blocks. Julie stares out a window that overlooks the parking lot. BORED.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT

Frank and the boys pull in near the curb.

CUT TO:

INT. JULIE'S OFFICE

Julie observes this with some interest. She rushes to the file cabinet, pulls out some files and runs out of the room. The Student, surprised, watches her go. Now alone, she snatches the stopwatch, clicks it off and smiles wickedly.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT, FRANK'S CAR

Thomas and Bobby walk away toward school. Frank talks into his CAR PHONE.

FRANK

Frank Crane. C-R-A-N-E It's the fifth time I've called the guy.

(calls out to boys)

Don't get into no trouble.

THOMAS

Any trouble.

FRANK

You neither.

(dials another number)

Hi, Angie. Get those stats today.

LA, Boston, Cincinnati, anybody with discounts. What cleats? They want shin guards!

He pulls out. Up ahead, near the exit, Julie appears waving file folders. Frank angles to avoid her. But she steps right into his path. The car SCREECHES to a halt.

JULIE

Mr. Crane, don't you ever read your mail?

FRANK

Only the junk. I love coupons.

JULIE

I'm Julie Davidson, District 5-B Director, Psychological Affairs.

FRANK

Yeah, yeah, right.

(cases her body)

My boys were right on about you.

(CONTINUED)

JULIE
We have to talk about their P.P.'s.

FRANK
Their whats?

JULIE
Personality Profiles. That's what
the letters were about -- the ones
without coupons. I need twenty
minutes.

FRANK
Can't now. Maybe Tuesday.
(thumbs & taps phone)
Forget it, gone. No way Thursday
either. Friday, 3:20 -- if I can
juggle . . .

JULIE
This is urgent.

FRANK
Tonight, seven o'clock, right there.

He's pointing to "Mancuso's", an upscale Italian restaurant
across the street.

JULIE
In a restaurant? Tonight?
Impossible.

FRANK
I have a client there at six thirty.

JULIE
It's out of the question.

FRANK
You don't like Italian?

She tries to say something. Too late. He BURNS RUBBER.

CUT TO:

INT. PHOENIX JOCKFITTERS - DAY

A huge warehouse crammed with sport teams' equipment of every
kind (uniforms, cleats, shoulder pads, balls and bats by the
thousands) and offices for salesmen along one wall.

PETE and CHIQUI, two macho guys in a grumpy mood, work on a
broken forklift. NETTLES, a competitive salesman, walks up
anxiously. He's good looking -- like a slick soap opera
villain.

(CONTINUED)

NETTLES

You muchachos seen Frank?

CHIQUI

Not in yet.

NETTLES

Per usual. Wait till he gets a load of this. I'd let you guys in on it, but you're not salesmen.

PETE

Move your ass, will ya? We're working here.

NETTLES

Could have fooled all of us.

CHIQUI

(reading a manual)

The camshaft is the shaft to which the cam is fastened and the crankshaft is the shaft which has the cranks.

ANGIE, sixty, Frank's secretary, walks over, pulls a hairpin out of her hair and opens the engine hatch. She fiddles inside for a second. THE ENGINE starts up. She slams the hatch, dusts off her hands, then takes Chiqui's manual and trashes it on her way back to her open desk nearby. The guys react. Frank enters in the background. Nettles spots him.

NETTLES

Yoo-hoo! Frank!

TWO WORKMEN file past Frank carrying a desk, a coffee mug on top of it with "FRANK'S CUP" printed on it. He picks it off.

FRANK

Isn't that my desk?

The Workmen keep going.

NETTLES

Was your desk. Guess what this is?

He holds a stack of papers up to Frank's face.

FRANK

You've written a novel.

NETTLES

No. But it is a work of art. You may have heard of it. The entire New York Giants account. Signed, sealed and delivered.

(CONTINUED)

FRANK

What you do, give the team a giant
blow job?

Pete and Chiqui CACKLE.

NETTLES

I'll take that as a sour grapes
compliment. We'll see who gets the
promotion.

He about-faces and walks off. Frank glares at him, then
notices the guys are staring at him.

FRANK

Those goddamned slips should have
been out of here two weeks ago!

PETE

Not our fault forklift broke.

FRANK

Don't give me your crap. Get 'em out-
a-here!

He walks off to his office.

CHIQUI

Ever since his old lady croaked
he's been a total prick.

PETE

Maybe Denise the Piece will give
him a lube job.

They gear up the forklift. Angie stops Frank before he gets
to his door. She holds up some papers.

ANGIE

Wait. Calls. P.O.'s. Also you've
got these, budget reports and your
stats from research.

FRANK

What's this 38-25-36?

ANGIE

Her measurements. Name's Vicky, new
rep from Spaulding. You should see
her, Frank. Gorgeous blue eyes, real
witty and -- best of all -- looking
for a good, solid family man.

FRANK

Angie, I'm engaged.

(CONTINUED)

ANGIE
(more to herself)
Tell me about it.

Frank opens his door.

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK'S OFFICE

DENISE, Frank's fiancé, stands in the middle of the room posing like a game show model. She's a knockout. The office is sparse, clean and very pastel. A WORKMAN exits with his ladder and tools.

DENISE
Surprise!

FRANK
Where's all my stuff?

DENISE
In the new desk. Don't you love it?

FRANK
It's -- clean.

Angie's snooping outside the door.

DENISE
Thanks for your help, Angie.
(closes the door on
her)
She nuzzles Frank. See what happens
when you screw around with the boss'
daughter? What's your verdict?

FRANK
It's nice.

DENISE
But . . . ?

FRANK
But I really need a bulletin board.

DENISE
Okay we'll give it back. I have
another surprise.

She gives him a present.

FRANK
For me?

(CONTINUED)