April 26, 1967

Dear Kathleen,

I was so very happy to get your letter today and it is the first since the fire that I've really wanted to answer (forgive the typography & errors; I kinda got carried away in an incoherent sort of way). . . . If I remember to put it in, you may find enclosed one (1) tranquilizer which you may take either before or after reading this, or not at all, as it suits you.

I am alive and phenomenally intact -- literally without so much as a scratch. My roommate is dead. And Marti Beck is dead. And others -- Peter Coonch, John Finch, and five girls from upstairs. The Pâschub was the only undergraduate co-ed dorm on campus; we Fuds lived on the ground floor and in the basement, senior and graduate women lived upstairs. Three Fuds, a resident professor, and five upstairs girlies died there.

It's hard to write about the fire, but I've known for some time that I would have to. You're the one I'd like to have this, if indeed you do get this letter (if I don't keep it for myself). Who knows? It might provide good material, if nothing else.

That Tuesday evening I came in too late to have
dinner at the rosclub; I had been seeing Citizen Kane at Studio. Jeff had just finished dinner and was getting ready to go to a lecture on land reform in Bolivia with Ann; I was fixing my own meal of mushroom soup and milk and Bugâs, using the hotplate and utensils he and I had bought together before spring vacation. He left, I ate and studied. At about 10 o'clock Jeff returned and we studied until 11:30. I'd decided that I needed 7 hours sleep, so I had to go to bed at 11:45. At 11:45 we were in bed.

I was awakened by Diego's beating on the door and shouting: Wake up, get out of here, fire. I wasn't hearing too well, but I recognized his voice. Diego probably wants to borrow a book. "God damn it, Diego, what the hell do you want!" Fire. Probably another fire in a trashcan. I opened the door; the hall was full of grey-yellow-brown smoke, from ceiling to diaphragm height. I looked both ways down the hall, but couldn't tell at which end of the hall the fire was. I rushed turned away from the door and saw Jeff pulling the covers off; it was the last I saw of him; one moment he was there, the next moment he was gone. I rushed to the window to see which way people were coming out;
but could see nothing. And from then on I had only myself to save.

Fire. Don't yell fire, it'll cause panic. I made my way down the hall toward the lobby, my head in the smoke. Near the edge of the lobby I decided I'll have to maneuver in that smoke to reach the lobby doors. And what if they're locked? (They were never kept locked.) I turned back and somehow reached my room. I ran to the window. "Which way can I go? Which way is clear?" No answer. Someone ran across the doorway. Don't run; you'll cause a panic. Sometime I flipped on the light. The smoke in the room was thick near the ceiling and dispersed the light. I could see better without the light. It scares me. I turned it off.

They ran toward the lobby. Maybe they knew a way out. I entered the hall a second time. The smoke was two feet off the floor. I dropped to my knees. Only air is down here. I crawled down the hall to the edge of the lobby. As I crawled, I passed a door glowing dull red. (The fire never reached near that section of the building.) Again, I decided I could not risk going into the lobby. I ran back, turning my left hand along the wall until I came to an open door.
It was mine.

Only one thing left to try. The window. The screen is hard to remove, the latches are corroded. The door will keep the fire away. I thought stand between me and the fire, give me a little more time, protect the property. I closed the door. My only hope is the window. If it doesn't open I'm trapped. Don't panic. I was really scared; I might panic, be unable to think, save myself. I went to a drawer of my desk, where I keep a screwdriver. It isn't there. I went to the top drawer of the dresser. I found a shoehorn. With both hands and the shoehorn I pulled up the latches, pulled off the screen, and went out the window.

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Breaking through the bushes, I ran gingerly over the blacktop of the parking lot (I'd gotten out with only my pajamas and glasses; I was barefoot.). A group of Ruds was trying to organize a nosecount. "Where is Jeff? Did Jeff get out?" No one had seen him. A foreign student was dangling from his second floor window, his feet touching the outstretched hands of some of the boys. I ran over just in time to catch him as he fell backwards, his legs held by the others. Some of the people were rousing people upstairs. I stayed with the
group to cooperate in a roll call (we Fuds all knew each other well and could check the 45 people quickly). "Mark, are you sure Jeff got out of the room?" "I'm pretty sure, but I can't say for certain." Loren and I went to the window of our room and scanned it with a flashlight for Jeff. His bed was empty.

We retired to Pi Beta Phi sorority a hundred yards away from the resclub. We traded subdued escape stories, comforted each other, and waited for the missing ones -- Marti, Mary Lou, Jeff, Peter, Mohn. Flames were pouring out Joe and Howie's room. Smoke was billowing from the windows of the second floor apartment, like a smokestack. Howie was describing how he had grabbed his pants, his shoes, and his brand new banjo, fumbled around in the smoke for his wallet with seventy dollars in it, and beat it out the window two minutes ahead of the flames (he hadn't found the wallet).

I wandered into the Pi Phi Kitchen for some coffee. Suddenly everyone around me was crying. I stiffened and looked at Phil. "Peter's dead." I stood there for a moment, trying to understand. I sat down. Across from me, Bill Soule was sitting, slowly tearing a styrofoam cup into tiny pieces; he had been Pete's
roommate, I couldn't cry; I didn't understand. What I did understand was that Jeff and Marti and the others might not have made it. Probably Jeff made it to somebody's house and doesn't want to come out because he sleeps in his longjohns, I'd said as we walked to Pi Phi, though I didn't really believe it.

The whole atmosphere in the house seemed to take a new turn. People were comforting each other frantically, without really believing they could give comfort. Josh was sobbing, curled up on the couch. Joe was crying, the boy who denied emotion. Glenn sat with his arm around a girl I'd never seen. I shook more frantic was the need to know about the others; we all dimly realized the importance of the fire, the deadliness of it. Rumors swept through the group: someone had seen John outside the reclimb, he had been taken to the hospital in critical condition, he was dead, he was alive, they'd found Jeff, they hadn't found Jeff. People wandered around aimlessly, asking news of everyone they met, or else sat numbly or sobbing.

Someone mentioned John was dead. "I was told he was taken to the hospital." "No, they found his body!" I wandered, shaking, through the people and furniture
Glennon was sitting on the couch. I looked at him. "Jeff..." "They identified him." I wandered to a chair and sat. I have no relevant image. I tried to think of them first as they were, happy and laughing -- and then...lying there, or something. It was insufficient.

Bob came over. I looked up at him. "She is dead," he whispered.

The morning was cool. Few were wandering now. They were sitting on furniture or floor, some with blankets. I lay on my side, curled up fetally, shaking.

Police were there, Mrs. Darling, the woman from Housing & Dining, Father Connor. The Pi Phi girls fixed breakfast and people phoned their parents and arranged for clothing and places to spend the day. The press was there, one fellow from local radio was recording interviews. I went upstairs and phoned long distance to my parents. "Dad, I'm okay, so don't worry. There's been a fire at the resclub. I'm okay, my roommate's dead."

Later I called three theater friends: Kinkaidian Bob Morse, former Fud Dave Skidmore, and their roommate Sam Rhine. They said come on over, so I signed out to their Collegetown apartment and caught a ride with the radio newsmen, who was taking Fred Kardon to the
hospital. (Fred was one of the two who made it out of the lobby of the resclub; three others died there. He had inhaled some smoke and had injured his feet running across the parking lot.)

They let me off about a block from the apartment and I ran from there. I stumbled into the apartment. Bob was getting breakfast and Dave was pulling on his pants. "Martl's dead," I blurted to Dave, and then realized what I'd said. Bob prepared some tea, Sam came in, and Dave poured himself some Triple Sec. I drank my tea and told my story and shook and talked and talked and talked and talked...

Sam is a conscious reader of the little symptomatic movements which are so telling: "I avoid using it if at all possible; it makes me unhuman...That morning I took one look at you and made the conscious decision to throw my humanity away."

They wrapped me in blankets, after I had showered and changed out of my smokey pajamas. (In Pi Phi one night I sniffed at my hands, blackened with smoke, and wiped them on my pajama legs, trying to get rid of the taint.) My hands and feet were cold, my kidneys were overworking. The fellows took informal turns sitting by me and keeping me tucked in bed as I talked...
incessantly.

Mary Uh! and two girlfriends came over and spent the day. Mary had been Pete Cooch's girlfriend. Hers was the terrible job of telling Pete's brother; the boy had been depressed and had been considering suicide. She phoned him at Dartmouth. She turned to Sam and "He sounds just like Peter." Sam says that that was the one moment he was really scared for Mary.

By evening I was well enough to go to dinner with the rest of my Program friends at the Straight. When I got back from dinner, Dad was there; he had flown out of Houston at noon that day.

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I spent that night in Dad's motel room, tossing and dreaming about the fire. 🌡

The next day was a day of work. I got into my room, which had not been touched by fire, and removed my belongings. The closed door had prevented serious smoke damage; everything was covered with a light layer of smoke and soot.