

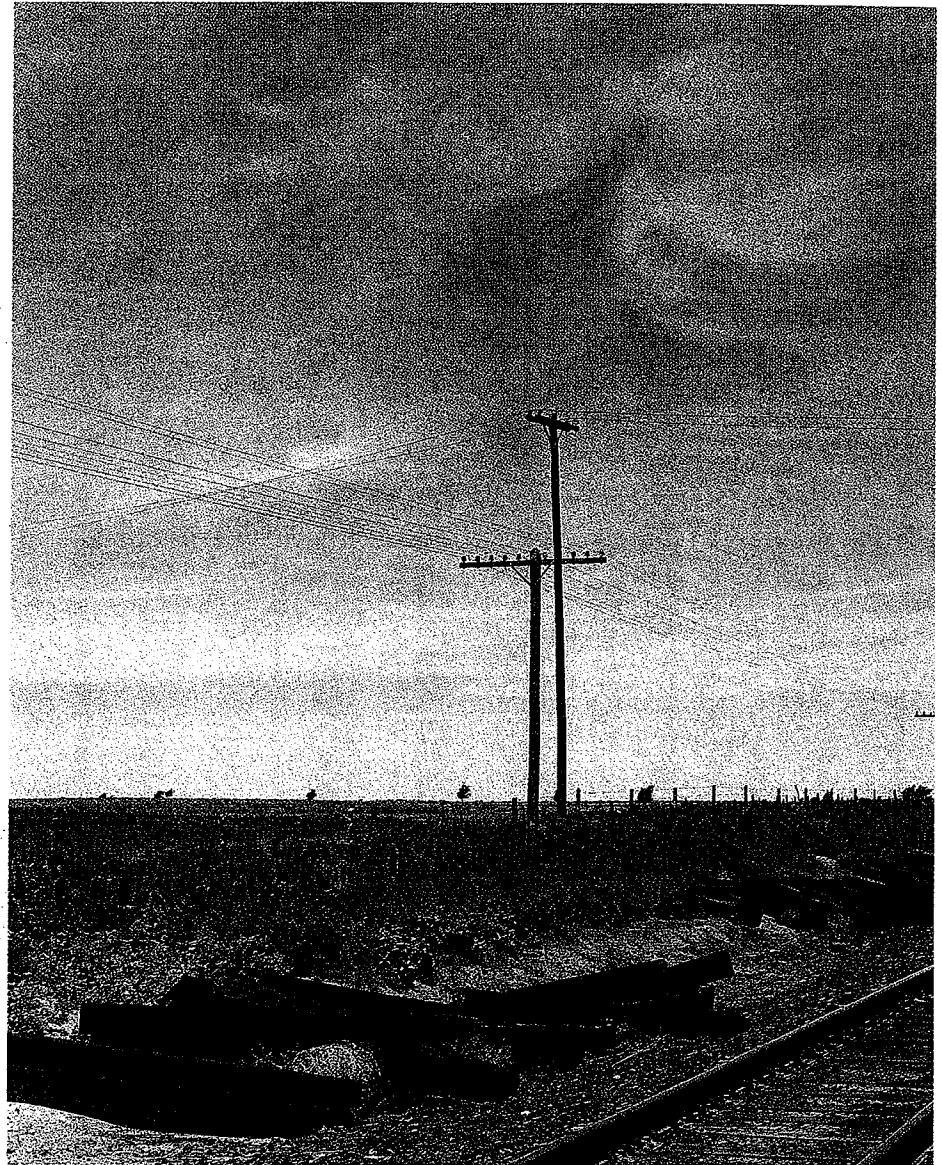
AT the lecture that night they had learned that human life was expendable. Melanie had sat there in shocked silence—the silence of guilt, mortification, and paranoia (what if someone should see her there in the crowd?)—while Dr. Toni Brinsley-Schneider, the Stanford bioethicist, informed them that humans, like pigs, chickens, and guppies, were replaceable. In the doctor's view, the infirm, the mentally impaired, criminals, premature infants, and the like were nonpersons, whose burden society could no longer be expected to support, especially in light of our breeding success.

"We're hardly an endangered species," she said with a grim laugh. "Did you know, all of you good and earnest people sitting here tonight, that we've just reached the population threshold of six billion?" She was cocked back from the lectern in a combative pose, her penurious little silver-rimmed reading glasses flinging fragments of light out into the audience. "Do any of you really want more condominiums, more shantytowns and favelas, more cars on the freeway, more group homes for the physically handicapped right around the corner from you? On your street? Next door?" She levelled her flashing gaze on them. "Well, do you?"

People shifted in their seats, a muted moist surge of sound that was like the timid lapping of waves on a distant shore. No one responded: this was a polite crowd, a liberal crowd dedicated to free expression, a university crowd, and, besides, the question had been posed for effect only. They'd have their chance to draw blood during the Q. & A.

Sean sat at attention beside Melanie, his face shining and smug. He was midway through the Ph.D. program in literary theory, and the theoreticians had hardened his heart: Dr. Brinsley-Schneider was merely confirming what he already knew. Melanie took his hand, but it wasn't a warm hand, a hand expressive of comfort and love—it was more like something dug frozen from the earth. She hadn't yet told him what she'd learned at two-thirty-three that afternoon, a secret as magical and expansive as a loaf of bread rising in a pan. Another sort of doctor had brought her the news, a doctor very different from the pinched and angry-looking middle-aged woman at the podium, a young dark-haired sylph of a woman, almost a girl, with a wide beatific

PETER BROWN, "SOUTH CENTRAL OKLAHOMA," (1985)/STEPHEN COHEN GALLERY, LA



FICTION
**CAPTURED
 BY THE INDIANS**

When theory and reality meet.

BY T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE

face and congratulatory eyes, dressed all in white like a figure out of a dream.

THEY walked to the car in silence, the mist off the ocean redrawing the silhouettes of the trees, the street lights softly glowing. Sean wanted a

burger—and maybe a beer—so they stopped off at a local bar-and-grill that the students hadn't discovered yet and she watched him eat and drink while the television over the bar replayed images of atrocities in the Balkans, the routine bombing of Iraq, and the itin-



erary of the railway killer. In between commercials for trucks that were apparently capable of scaling cliffs and fording rivers, they showed the killer's face, a mug shot of a slightly built Latino with an interrupted mustache and two dead eyes buried like artifacts in his head.

"You see that?" Sean said, nodding at the screen, the half-eaten burger clenched in one hand, the beer in the other. "That's what Brinsley-Schneider and these people are talking about. You think this guy worries much about the sanctity of human life?"

Can we afford compassion? Melanie could hear the lecturer's droning, thin voice in the back of her head, and she saw the dour, pale muffin of a face frozen in the spotlight when somebody in the back shouted "Nazi!" "I don't

know why we have to go to these lectures anyway," she said. "Last year's series was so much more—do I want to say 'uplifting' here? Remember the woman who'd written that book about beekeeping? And the old professor—what was his name?—who talked about Yeats and Maud Gonne?"

"Stevenson Elliot Turner. He's emeritus in the English Department."

"Yeah," she said, "that's right, and why can't we have more of that sort of thing? Tonight—I don't know, she was so depressing. And so wrong."

"Are you kidding me? Turner's like the mummy's ghost—that talk was stupefying. He was probably giving the same lecture in English 101 thirty years ago. At least Brinsley-Schneider's controversial. At least she keeps you awake."

Melanie wasn't listening, and she didn't want to argue or debate or discuss. She wanted to tell Sean—who wasn't her husband, not yet, because they had to wait till he got his degree—that she was pregnant. But she couldn't. She already knew what he would say, and it was right on the same page with Dr. Toni Brinsley-Schneider.

She watched his eyes settle on the screen a moment, then drift down to the burger in his hand. He drew back his lips and took a bite, nostrils open wide, the iron muscles working in his jaw. "We live by the railroad tracks," Melanie said, by way of shifting the subject. "You think we have anything to worry about?"

"What do you mean?"

"The train killer."

Sean gave her a look. He was in his debating mode, his put-down mode, and she could see it in his eyes. "He doesn't kill trains, Mel," he said. "He kills people. And, yes, everybody has something to worry about, everybody on this planet. And if you were listening to half of what Brinsley-Schneider was saying tonight, I wouldn't be surprised if every third person out there on the street was a serial killer. There's too many of us, Mel, let's face it. You think things are going to get better? You think things are better now than when we were kids? When our parents were kids? It's over. Face it."

Something corny and ancient was on the jukebox—Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, somebody like that—because the place smacked of the kind of authenticity people were looking for, the kind of authenticity that cried out from the fallen arches, ravaged faces, and sclerotic

livers of the regulars, to whom she and Sean, at twenty-nine and thirty, respectively, were as inauthentic as newborns.

At home, she changed into a cotton nightgown and got into bed with a book. She wasn't feeling anything, not elation or pain or disappointment, only the symptoms of a headache coming on. The book was something she'd discovered at a yard sale two days earlier—"Captured by the Indians: 15 Firsthand Accounts, 1750-1870"—and the minute she opened it she was swept up into a voyeuristic world of pain and savagery that trumped any horror she could conceive of. It wasn't a good thing to be captured by the Indians, as Sean had snidely observed on seeing her poised behind the cover the night before last, not good at all. There were no notions here of the politically correct, of revisionist history, or of the ethics of one people forcibly displacing another: no, it was the hot flash of murder and reprisal, the thump of the musket ball hitting home, the operation of knife and tomahawk on unresisting flesh. To die, to be murdered, to be robbed of your life and consciousness and being, that was the stuff of morbid fascination, and she couldn't get enough of it.

Sean was in his underwear, the briefs he preferred to boxers, the sort of thing she'd always associated with boys—little boys, children, that is—and as she watched him pad across the carpet on his way to the bathroom and his nightly ritual of cleansing, clipping, flossing, brushing, tweezing, and shaving it struck her that she'd never in her life been in an intimate situation with a man—or boy—in boxers. "The last they heard," Sean was saying, and he paused now to gaze at her over the mound of the bedspread and her tented knees, "he was in the Midwest someplace—after leaving Texas, I mean. That's a long ways from California, Mel, and, besides, his whole thing is so random—"

"He rides freight trains—or hops them, isn't that the terminology?" she said, peering over the cover of the book. "He hops freight trains, Sean, and that means he could be anywhere in twenty-four hours—or forty-eight. How long does it take to drive from Kansas to Isla Vista? Two days? Three?" She wanted to tell him about the doctor, and what the doctor had said, and what it was going to mean for them, but she didn't want to see the look on his face, didn't

want to have to fight him, not now, not yet. He'd go pale and tug involuntarily at the grown-over hole in his left earlobe where a big gold hoop had resided before he got serious about his life, and then he'd tell her that she couldn't have her baby for the same reason that she couldn't have a dog or even a cat—at least until he'd done his dissertation, at least until then.

"I don't know, Mel," he said, and all the tiredness and resignation in the world crept into his voice, as if a simple discussion could martyr him. "What do you want me to say? He's coming through the window tonight? Of the two hundred and seventy million potential victims in the country, he's singled us out, zeroed right in on us like a homing pigeon?"

"Statistics," she said, and she was surprised at her own vehemence. "That's like saying you have about the same chance of getting attacked by a shark as you do of getting hit by lightning, and, yeah, sure, but anybody anywhere can get hit by lightning, and how many people live by the ocean, how many actually go in it, and of them how many are crazy enough—or foolhardy, that's the word I want here—how many are foolhardy enough to go out where the sharks are? Probably a hundred per cent of *them* get eaten, and we live right by the tracks, don't we?"

As if in answer, there was the sudden

sharp blast of the northbound's whistle as it neared the intersection two blocks away, and then the building thunder of the train itself, the fierce clatter of the churning wheels and everything in the room trembling with the rush of it. Sean rolled his eyes and disappeared into the bathroom. When the thunder subsided and he could be heard again, he poked his head round the doorframe. "It's the Indians," he said.

"It has nothing to do with the Indians." She wouldn't give him this, though he was right, of course—or partially, anyway. "It's Brinsley-Schneider, who you seem to think is so great. Brinsley-Schneider and eugenics and euthanasia and all the rest of the deadly 'u's.'"

He was smiling the smile of the literary theorist in a room full of them, the smile that made him look like a toad with an oversized insect clamped in its jaws. "The deadly 'u's?'" he repeated. And then, softening, he said, "All right, if it'll make you feel any better I'll check the doors and windows, O.K.?"

Her eyes were on the book. Way off in the night she could hear the dying rattle of the last car at the end of the train. Her life was changing, and why couldn't she feel good about it—why shouldn't she?

He was in the doorway still, his face settling into the lines and grooves he'd dug for it over the past two and a half

years of high seriousness. He looked exactly like himself. "O.K.?" he said.

SHE didn't have to be at work until twelve the next day—she was an assistant to the reference librarian at the university library and her schedule was so flexible it was all but bent over double—and after Sean left for class she sat in front of the TV with the sound off and read the account of Lavina Eastlick, who was twenty-nine and the mother of five when the Sioux went on a rampage near Acton, Minnesota, in the long-forgotten year of 1862. There was a moment's warning, no more than that. A frightened neighbor shouting in the yard, first light, and suddenly Lavina Eastlick—a housewife, a hopeful young woman Melanie's age rudely jolted from sleep—was running barefoot through the wet grass, in her nightgown, a rifle clutched in her hand. The Indians soon overtook her and cut down her husband, her children, her neighbors, and her neighbors' children, taking the women captive. She'd been shot twice, and could barely stand, let alone walk. When she stumbled and fell, a Sioux brave beat her about the head and shoulders with the stock of his rifle and left her for dead. Later, when they'd gone, she was able to crawl off and hide in the brush through the long afternoon and interminable night that followed. The wounded children—hers and her neighbors—lay sprawled in the grass behind her, crying out for water, but she couldn't move to help them. On the second afternoon, the Indians returned to dig at the children's wounds with sharpened sticks until the terrible gargling cries choked off and the locusts in the trees filled the void with their mindless chant.

And what would Dr. Toni Brinsley-Schneider have thought of that? She'd probably applaud the Indians for eliminating the useless and weak, who would only have grown up crippled around their shattered limbs in any case. That was what Melanie was thinking as she closed the book and glanced up at the casual violence scrolling across the TV screen, but once she was on her feet she realized she was hungry and headed off in the direction of the kitchen, thinking tuna fish on rye with roasted sunflower seeds and red bell pepper. She supposed she'd be putting on weight now, eating for two, and wouldn't that be the way to announce the baby to Sean six months down the



"I sense a lot more going on with you than 'house-husband.'"

road, like the prom mom who hid it till the last fatal minute. *And you thought I was just going to fat, didn't you, honey?*

Outside, beyond the windows, the sun washed over the flowers in the garden, all trace of the night's mist burned off. There were juncos and finches at the feeder she shared with the upstairs neighbor, a dog asleep at the curb across the street, pure white fortresses of cloud building over the mountains. It was still, peaceful, an ordinary day, no Indians in sight, no bioethicists, no railway killers hopping off freight trains and selecting victims at random, and she chopped onions and diced celery with a steady hand while something inexpressibly sad came over the radio, a cello playing in a minor key, all alone, until it was joined by a single violin that sounded as if a dead man were playing it, playing his own dirge—and maybe he was dead, maybe the recording was fifty years old, she was thinking, and she had a sudden image of a man with a long nose and a Gypsy face, serenading the prisoners at Auschwitz.

Stop it, she told herself, just stop it. She should be filled with light, shouldn't she? She should be knitting, baking, watching the children at the playground with the greedy intensity of a connoisseur.

The sunflower seeds were in the pan, the one with the loose handle and the black nonstick surface, the heat turned up high, when the doorbell rang. The violin died at that moment—literally—and the unctuous, breathless voice of the announcer she hated (the one who always sounded as if he were straining over a bowel movement) filled the apartment as she crossed the front room and stepped into the hall. She was about to pull open the door—it would be the mailman at this hour, offering up a clutch of bills and junk mail and one of Sean's articles on literary theory (or Theory, as he called it, "Just Theory, with a capital 'T,' like Philosophy or Physics"), returned from an obscure journal with postage due—but something stopped her.

"Who is it?" she called from behind the door, and she could smell the sunflower seeds roasting in the pan.

There was no answer, so she moved to the window beside the door and parted the curtains. A man stood on the concrete doorstep, staring at the flat plane of the door as if he could see through it. He was small and thin, no more than five-five or six, tanned to the color of the copper teakettle on the stove and dressed

in the oily jeans and all-purpose long-sleeved shirt of the bums who lined Cabrillo Boulevard with their Styrofoam cups and pint bottles—or should she call them "panhandlers" or "the homeless" or "the apartmentally challenged"? Sean called them bums, and she guessed she'd fallen into the habit herself. They said crude things to you when you walked down the street, gesturing with fingers that were as black as the stubs of cigars. They were bums, that was all, and who needed them?

But then the man saw her there at the window and turned to her, and she had a shock: he was Hispanic, a Latino just like the man on TV, the killer, with the same dead cinders for eyes. He put three fingers together and pushed them at his open mouth, and she saw then that he had no mustache—no, no mustache, but what did that mean? Anybody could shave, even a bum.

"What do you want?" she called, feeling trapped in her own apartment, caught behind the wall of glass like a fish in an aquarium.

He looked surprised by the question. What did he want? He wanted food, money, sex, booze, drugs, her car, her baby, her life, her apartment. "Hungry," he said. And then, when she didn't respond, "You got work?"

She just shook her head—no, she didn't have any work, and all the time that she had to give to this man, this stranger, this bum, had already been used up, because there was smoke in the kitchen and the seeds were burning in the pan.

IT was past eight when she drove home from work, feeling exhausted, as if she were in her eighth month instead of the second. The day was softening into night, birds dive-bombing the palms along the boulevard, joggers and in-line skaters reduced to shadows on the periphery of her vision. All through the afternoon the mist had been rolled up like a carpet on the horizon, but it was moving closer now and she could smell it on the air—it was going to be another dense, compacted night. She parked and came up the walk and saw that the upstairs neighbor—Jessica, Jessica Something, who'd been there only a month and was so pathologically shy she cupped both hands to her face when she talked to you as if a real live moving mouth were somehow offensive—had been doing something in the flower

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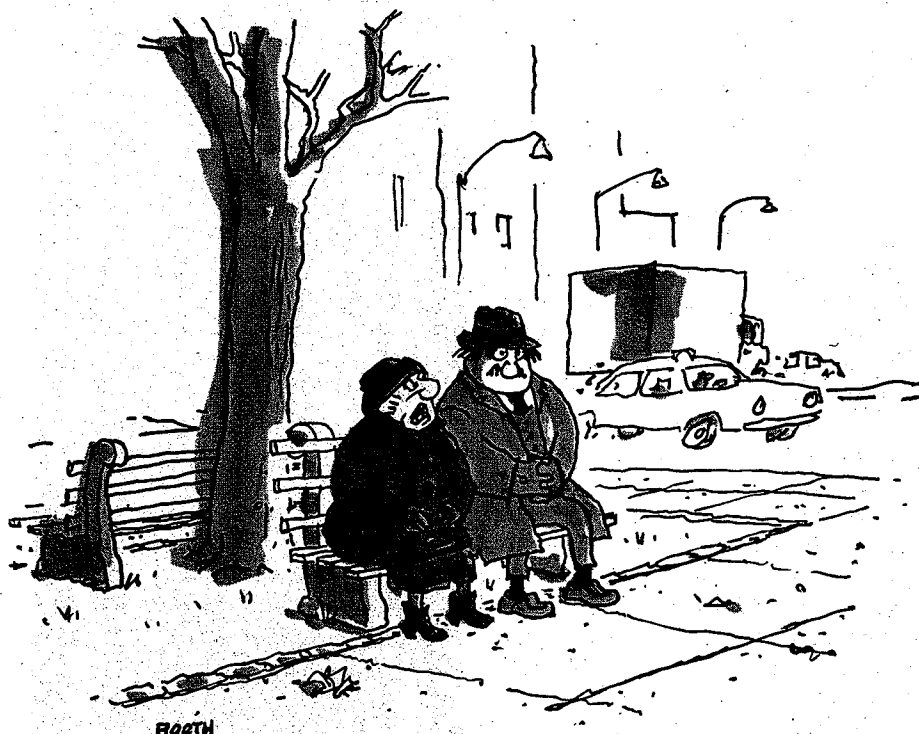
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"Willard! About your mother's biscuits and coleslaw! Shut up about your mother's biscuits! And shut up about your mother's coleslaw!"

garden. The earth was raw in several spots, as if it had been turned over, and there was a spade leaning against the side of the house. Not that it mattered to Melanie—she'd never had a green thumb and plants were just plants to her. If Jessica wanted to plant flowers, that was fine; if she wanted to dig them up, that was fine, too.

Sean was in the kitchen, banging things around and singing—bellowing—along with one of Wagner's operas, the only music he ever listened to. Which one was it? She'd heard them all a thousand times. There it was, yes, Siegfried going down for the count: "Götterdämmerung." Sean was making his famous shrimp-and-avocado salad and he was in the throes of something—Wagner, Theory, some sort of testosterone rush—and he barely glanced up at her as she trudged into the bedroom. Her mistake was in taking off her shoes—the flats she wore for the sake of her feet while propping up an automatic smile behind the reference desk—because once her shoes were off she felt out of balance and had to rest her head on the pillow, just for a minute.

The gods of Valhalla had been laid to rest and the house was silent when she awoke to the soft click of the bedroom

door. Sean was standing there framed in the doorway, the tacky yellow globe of the hallway light hanging over his shoulder like a captive moon. It was dark beyond the windows. "What?" he said. "Are you sick or something?"

Was she? Now was her chance, now was the time to tell him, to share the news, the joyous news, pop the cork on the bottle of champagne and let's go out to a nice place, a really nice place, and save the famous shrimp-and-avocado salad for tomorrow. "No," she said. "No. Just tired, that's all."

At dinner—Sean and Lacan and a scatter of papers, the salad, lemonade from the can, and an incongruous side dish of ranch-style barbecue beans, also from the can—she did tell him about the man at the door that morning. "He said he wanted work," she said, waving a forkful of shrimp and beans in an attempt to delineate the scene for the third time, "and I told him I didn't have any work for him. That was it. The whole thing."

SEAN had begun to develop a groove just over the bridge of his nose, a V-shaped gouge that might have been a scar or the mark of a hot branding iron. It vanished when he was asleep or

sunk into the couch with a beer and the *Times*, but it was there now, deeper than ever. "You mean he was Mexican?"

"I don't know," she said. "He was a Latino. I was scared. He really scared me."

There was a long silence. The clock her mother had given her ticking dramatically from atop the brick-and-board bookcase in the hall, someone's sprinklers going on outside, the muted rumble of Jessica Something's TV seeping down through the ceiling—Melanie half expected to hear the blast of the train's whistle, but it was too early yet. "It could be," Sean said finally. "I mean, why not? You're right. The guy takes a train, he could be anywhere. And then there's the aleatory factor."

She just stared at him.

"Chance. Luck. Fate. You can't buck fate." And then a look came over his face, two parts high seriousness, one part vigilante. "But you can be ready for it when it comes—you can be prepared." Suddenly he was on his feet. "You just wait here, just sit tight," and his voice had an edge to it, as if she'd been arguing with him, as if she had to be restrained from running off into the night like one of the screaming teen-agers in a cheap horror film. "I'll be right back."

She wanted a glass of wine, but she knew that she couldn't drink anymore, not if she was going to keep the baby—and if she hadn't known, the doctor had taken her down a smiling anfractuosity road full of caveats and prohibitions, the sort of thing she, the doctor, must go through ten times a day, albeit tailoring her tone to the educational level of the patient. Outside, the sprinklers switched off with an expiring wheeze. She could hear Sean in the bedroom, rummaging around for something. Tonight—she would tell him tonight.

Because the knowledge was too big for her to contain, and she wanted to call her mother and have a long confidential chat, and call her sisters, too—but before that, before there could be any possibility of that, she had to tell Sean, and Sean had to say the things she needed to hear. During her five-o'clock break, she'd confided in one of the girls she worked with, Gretchen Mohr, but it did nothing to reassure her. Gretchen was only twenty-three, in no way serious about the guy she was dating, and Melanie could tell from the way she squeezed her eyes shut over the news that the idea of a baby was about as welcome to her as paraplegia or

epilepsy. Oh, she tried to cover herself with a flurry of congratulations and a non-stop barrage of platitudes and one-liners, but the final thing she said, her last and deepest thought, gave her away: "I don't know," she sighed, staring down into the keyhole of her Diet Coke can as if she were reading tea leaves. "I just don't think I'd be comfortable bringing a baby into a world like this."

When Melanie looked up, Sean was standing over her. He was wearing a T-shirt with a picture of Freud on it, over a legend that read "Dr. Who?" His hair was slicked down and the left side of his face, up to and encircling the ear, was inflamed with the skin condition he was forever fighting. But that was ordinary, that was the way he always looked. What was different was his eyes—proud, incandescent, lit up like fireworks—and his hands, or what was in his hands. Swaddled in coarse white cloth that was stained with what might have been olive oil lay an object she recognized from the movies, from TV, and from pawnshop display cases: a gun.

"What is that?" she said, edging away from him. "What are you showing me?"

"Come on, Mel, give me a break."

"It's a gun, isn't it?"

"We're on the ground floor here, and we're going to lock the windows tonight, even if it's hot, which I doubt because the fog's already coming in, and we're going to keep this by the bed, on the night table, that's all."

She'd drawn up her legs and hugged them to her, as far away from him on the couch as she could manage to be. "I don't believe you," she said, and she could hear the thin whine of complaint in her own voice. "You know what my father would say if he saw you now? Where did you get it? Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded, and she couldn't help herself—her voice broke on the final syllable.

He drew the thing back, took it from its cradle and raised it up in one hand until it grazed the ceiling. The muscles of his forearm flexed, the soiled rag dropped to the carpet. "Son of a bitch," he said. "Son of a fucking bitch. Tell me this," he said. "Would you rather be the killer or the killee?"

SHE was asleep and dreaming the image of a baby floating in amniotic fluid, the cord attached, eyes shut tight—a big baby, an enormous glowing baby floating free like the interstel-

lar embryo of "2001"—when a sudden sharp explosion jolted her awake. It took her a moment, heart pounding; breath coming quick, to understand what it was—it was a scream, a woman's scream, improvised and fierce. The room was dark. Sean was asleep beside her. The scream—a single rising note trailing off into what might have been a sob or a gasp—seemed to have come from above, where Jessica Something lived alone with her potted plants and two bloated, pampered, push-faced cats that were never allowed out of the apartment for fear of the world and its multiple dangers. Melanie sat up and caught her breath.

Nothing. The alarm clock on the night table flashed 1:59 and then 2:00.

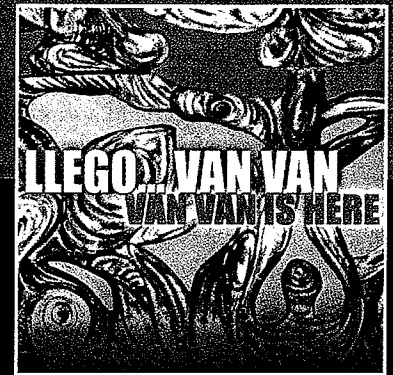
Earlier, after a dessert of tapioca pudding with mandarin-orange slices fresh from the can, she and Sean had watched a costume drama on the public station that gave her a new appreciation for the term mediocre (mediocre, as she observed to Sean, didn't come easy—you had to work at it), and then she'd slipped into bed with her book while the station went into pledge-break mode and Sean sat there paralyzed on the couch. She hadn't read two paragraphs before he tiptoed into the room, naked and in full amatory display. She left the light on, the better to admire him, but the book dropped to the floor, and then it didn't matter. She felt new, re-created. His body was so familiar, but everything was different now. She'd never been so aroused, rising up again and again to hold him deep inside her in the place where the baby was. Afterward, immediately afterward, almost as if he'd been drugged, he fell asleep with his head on her breast, and it was left to her to reach up awkwardly and kill the lamp. They hadn't discussed a thing.

But now—now there was chaos, and it erupted all at once. There was a thump overhead, the caustic burn of a man's voice, and then another scream, and another, and Melanie was out of bed, the walls pale and vague, the dark shadow that was Sean lurching up mechanically, and "What?" he was saying. "What is it?"

Footsteps on the stairs. More screams. Melanie flicked on the light and there was Sean, dressed only in his briefs, the long muscles of his legs, all that skin, and the gun in his hand, the pistol, the nasty gleaming black little thing he'd bought at

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a gun show six months ago and never bothered to tell her about. "Sean," she said. "Sean, don't!" But he was already out the door, racing down the hall in the sick yellow wash of the overhead light, already at the front door, the screams from above rising, rising. She was in her nightgown, barefoot, but she had no thought for anything but to get out that door and put an end to whatever this was.

There was a street light out front but the fog had cupped a hand over it and blotted the light from the windows and the stairway, too. Melanie shot a glance up the stairs to where Jessica stood, bracing herself against the railing, in nothing but panties and a brassiere torn off one shoulder, and then she saw the glint of Sean's back across the lawn, where the cars threw up a bank of shadow against the curb. He was shouting something—ragged, angry syllables that would have made no sense to anyone, not even a Theorist—and she saw then that there was somebody else there with him, a dark shifting figure rallying round a shuffle of feet on the pavement. She was closer now, running, Sean's feet glowing in the night, the long white stalks of his legs and expanse of his back—he seemed to be wrestling with a shadow, but, no, it was an animate thing, a man, a dark little man in bum's clothes with a shovel clenched in both hands and Sean fighting him for it. Where was the gun? There was no gun. Both of Sean's hands were on the shovel and both of the little man's, and now Jessica was screaming again. "The gun," Sean said. "In the grass. Get the gun."

In that moment, the little man managed to wrench the shovel free, and in the next—it happened so quickly that she wasn't sure she actually saw it—he caught Sean under the chin with the haft, and then the blade, and Sean was on the ground. She never hesitated. Before the man could bring the blade down—and that was what he meant to do, no mistake about it, his arms already raised high for a savage stabbing thrust—she took hold of the haft with all the strength in her and pulled it tight to her chest.

She could smell him. She could feel him. He hung on, the little man, the bum, the one who'd been on the doorstep that afternoon with his reeking breath and greasy clothes, and then he jerked so violently at the shovel that she almost pitched headlong into him, into the spill of his flesh and the dankness of the grass. But she didn't. She jerked back, and Jes-

sica screamed, and Sean, reeling like a drunk, began to pick himself up off the lawn, and for the instant before the man let go of the shovel and flung himself into the shadows across the street, she was staring him full in the face—yes, but she wasn't seeing the man on the TV or the man on the porch or any one of the army of bums lined up along the street in their all-purpose shirts and sweat-stained caps, she was seeing Dr. Toni Brinsley-Schneider, Dr. Brinsley-Schneider the bioethicist, just her.

THERE were two policemen. From where she was sitting at the end of the couch, Melanie could see their cruiser reined in at the curb, the interior a black pit, the slowly revolving light on top chopping up the night over and over again. They were built like runners or squash players, both of them—crisp, efficient men in their thirties, who looked away from her bare legs and feet and into her eyes. "So you heard screams, and this was about what time?"

They'd already taken Jessica Something's statement—Jessica Fortgang, she had a name now: Ms. Fortgang, as the policemen referred to her—and Sean, hunched in the armchair with an angry red welt under his chin, had given his version of events, too. The man in the night, the bum, the one who'd been the cause of all this, had escaped, at least for the time being, and they were denied the satisfaction of seeing him handcuffed in the back of the cruiser, bowed and contrite. Sean had been in a state when the police arrived, clenching his jaws as if he were biting down hard on something, gesturing with a closed fist and wide sweeps of his arm. "The railway killer, it was him, the railway killer," he kept repeating, until the policeman with the mustache, the taller one, told him that the railway killer had turned himself in at the Mexican border some fifteen hours earlier. "That was the Texas border," he added, and then his partner, in a flat, professional voice, said that they were treating this as an assault, in any case, possibly an attempted rape. "Your neighbor, Ms. Fortgang? She apparently hired this individual to do some yard work this after-

noon, and then invited him in for iced tea and a sandwich when he was done. Then he comes back at night—and this is a cultural thing, you understand, a woman looks at one of these guys twice and he expects a whole lot more. He's a transient, that's all, nobody from around here. But we'll get him."

Melanie answered their questions patiently, though her heart was still jumping in her chest and she kept glancing at Sean, as if for guidance. But Sean was sullen, distant, withdrawn into some corner of himself—the gun was an embarrassment, the man had knocked him down, he'd been involved in an ordinary altercation with an ordinary bum, and the railway killer had already given himself up. She saw the lines in his face, saw the way his lower lip pushed his chin down into the soft flesh beneath it. Theory couldn't help here. Theory deconstructs. Theory has no purpose, no point, no overview or consolation—it was a kind of intellectual masturbation. If she hadn't known it before, she knew it now.

The police thanked them, tried on the briefest of smiles, and then Sean showed them to the door, and Melanie got up from the couch with the vague idea of making herself a cup of herbal tea to help her unwind. Just as the door closed, she called out Sean's name, and she almost said it, almost said, "Sean, there's something I've been wanting to tell you." But there was no use in that now.

Sean turned away from the door, his shoulders slumped, the corners of his mouth drawn down. After the skirmish on the lawn, he'd shrugged into a pair of jeans and the first shirt he could find—a Hawaiian print, festive with palm fronds and miniature pineapples—and she saw that he'd misbuttoned it. He looked hopeless. He looked lost in his own living room.

She held that picture of him, and then she was thinking, unaccountably, of a captive of the Sioux, a young woman taken from her husband to be bride to a chief, the business settled in the smoke and confusion of a desperate fight, her daughter crying out over the cacophony of shouts and curses and the rolling thunder of a hundred rifles firing at once. Months later, fleeing with her captors after a loss in battle, she watched a brave from another party come up to them on his pony, in full regalia, trailing the shawl she'd knitted for her daughter and a tiny shrunken scalp with the hair—the blond shining hair—still attached. ♦

