shelby settles harper

WHO KILLED THE SPARROW

I meet my love Bobby at the Indian boarding school in New Mexico, where I've been sent to make something of myself. "Painter Girl," he calls me, smiling, with dimples in both cheeks. I let him make love to me, even though I'm afraid and I know I shouldn't. Afterwards, we go for walks, huddling closely together against the night air in our hand-me-down coats that aren't quite warm enough, crunching snow beneath our flimsy tennis shoes. Bobby and I talk little during those walks. We hold hands and watch our breath fog in front of us while a million stars light the sky. I hope for a falling star, so that I can make a wish. At boarding school, holding Bobby's hand, I still believe in happiness, and that wishes can come true.

Bobby is a basketball star at our school. He is half-Kiowa and from the dry, plains, western part of Oklahoma, the same as me. Bobby is proud, sees himself as a warrior, like his father and grandfather, who were some of the best horsemen in the tribe. Bobby talks about enlisting for Vietnam when he is old enough. At seventeen, Bobby is as good at drinking as he is at basketball.

At the boarding school, everyone treats me special because my cousin is T.C. Cannon. White people love his art and say he is the Indian Van Gogh. My paintings are not as good as Tommy Wayne's, as our family calls him, but like my cousin, I paint Indians. Indians sitting in wicker chairs, one weathered brown hand resting on blue jeans, the other raising a cup of Folgers to unsmiling lips. Indians smoking cigarettes while leaning against Chevy pickups bought with gas royalty money, the imaginary buffalo roaming the plains in the distance.

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BOBBY AND I RETURN TO Oklahoma in the summer, when my swollen belly betrays our secret. My mother is unable to look me in the eye. "Now you're just as worthless as every other Indian girl around here," she says. Even though it hurts that my mother is angry and it's too hot and I'm too big to paint, I don't care because I'm with Bobby and we're making a family.

We don't have any money, so we go to the Indian Health Services clinic at the tribal complex. The clinic is a ramshackle of two dilapidated prefab buildings, the smaller one used as the waiting room and the other as the doctor's office and examination room.

We arrive early, but the waiting room is already crowded and my name is thirteenth on the list. By midmorning, there are no empty seats and the air conditioning unit, embedded in the one small window, cannot keep the waiting room comfortable. Next to me sits an elder who reminds me of Grandma Parton because she holds her oversized purse tight to her lap, as if someone might steal it if she loosened her grip. The woman gives me her copy of the *Daily Oklahoman* when she is finished reading it. I scan an article about the nomination of Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court and then use the newspaper to fan myself.

I sit across from a man about my mother's age who wears a baseball cap that says "Korean War Veteran." Every thirty minutes or so he rises from his chair and goes outside to the open-air walkway connecting the two prefab buildings to smoke a cigarette. By his third cigarette, Bobby's joining the man, and I save their seats while they are outside.

Some people pass time in the waiting room by snacking on crackers and coffee. I hear my own stomach rumbling as the clock shows noon. We forgot to pack food, but Bobby has a quarter, and we share a Pepsi from the vending machine.

A few of the Indians complain about the long wait. "It's free health care. What do you expect?" the bored-looking girl behind the counter says to all of us in the waiting room. She is light-skinned, probably not even a quarter blood. We know the health clinic didn't come free to our people, but nobody argues with her.

When my name is called, Bobby helps me out of the chair and we cross the open-air walkway and the smokers and enter the examination and office room. "Close the door," the doctor says without looking at us. It is very cold in this room and I shiver.

I close the door and stand awkwardly next to Bobby. The walls are blank, except for a framed copy of the doctor's diploma from the University of Oklahoma. In the picture on his desk, the doctor wears a self-satisfied smile and his arms surround his pretty blonde wife and four young tow-headed children.

The doctor tells me to lie on the table so he can listen to the baby's heartbeat. He asks me if I know who the father is, and I point at Bobby. He asks if we intend to keep the baby or give it up for adoption. I tell him we will keep it, of course. I don't share that I hope the baby will be an artist, like me.

Afterwards, the doctor hands me paperwork. "I need your signature."

I try to pass the papers to Bobby, but he shakes his head no, crosses his arms, and looks away. I scan the three pages, but I don't understand the meaning of all the words. "Should I read this whole thing?" I ask.

"Do you know how to read?" His face is without expression.

I feel my cheeks grow hot, and I turn to Bobby, wanting him to speak up for us—for himself, for me, for our unborn child, and for our people—but Bobby isn't looking at the doctor or me. He is focused on his used-to-be-Indian-school-sports-star shoes, which have seen more bars than basketball courts since we left school.

The doctor's eyes have settled on Bobby, and on his face I catch the pity and irritation he feels towards our people. To the doctor, Bobby is not a basketball star, or the most popular boy at our boarding school, or the father of my child. He's just another Indian filling up the waiting room of the clinic. The doctor has reduced Bobby to his smell: cheap whiskey, cigarettes, and poverty.

I fight tears by staring at the green PAINTER GIRL tattooed above my knuckles, carved by a friend one night at boarding school. The doctor can't see me as beautiful, like Bobby does. He doesn't know I'm the cousin of T.C. Cannon and he doesn't know that I can paint, too, and that I paint with my soul.

This man is just one of a string of white doctors stuck serving Indians to pay off medical debt, and as soon as he can, he will flee to Oklahoma City. Where's the Indian doctor, I wonder, someone who looks like us and doesn't ask such questions?

I want to tell him that we signed his treaties, and in exchange for the land, we were guaranteed education and health services, and that he works for us. But no words form in my mouth. Bobby, too, is voiceless—he isn't going to say anything in defense of me, him, our family, or our people.

"It gives us permission to treat you," the doctor says, breaking the silence in the room. He's looking for something in one of his generic gray desk drawers.

Without reading the words on the page, I sign my name in blue ink at the bottom, an impulsive decision that will bring upon my family unimaginable horror.

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IN T.C.'S PAINTING *WHO Shot the Arrow. . .Who Killed the Sparrow. . .?*, a Navajo girl stands on a white plane, her back to the viewer while she faces a green atomic bomb exploding ten miles distant. Her hands are crossed at her lower back, where her shirt tucks into a long skirt. I always wondered if her hands were crossed in submission, or in resignation of the approaching bomb. T.C. meant this painting to show another control device that would keep the Indian quiet for a decade or so.

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"CONSENT TO STERILIZATION FOLLOWING A stillbirth," they tell me when I wake in the hospital. For weeks afterwards, I lie in bed at my mother's house, my hands clutching the folds of abdomen skin that once stretched to hold my baby and now hang loose around my midsection like a deflated tire. I squeeze the folds like I squeeze dough when making frybread. Sometimes I grip so tightly tears form in my eyes.

I am told the baby was a girl. I leave my bed one night while my mother and Bobby sleep, and stand in the moonlight. I light the rolled tobacco in an effort to pray to the Creator. I want to ask Him to watch over her soul and to ask Him to ease my suffering, but I am too angry and my questions are too many and I can only throw the tobacco to the ground and stomp it, until the corn husk is torn and the tobacco has become part of the dirt.

I mourn the loss of my dreams. Bobby and I were to make four babies. There would be two girls and two boys, and they would play with one another, holding hands and running in the sunshine. We would pow wow all summer, and the boys would become famous fancydancers. The girls would dance, too, in jingle dresses made from tobacco can lids molded by my fingers.

One afternoon, Bobby appears, smelling of alcohol but brimming with hope. He brings me a book of art. Its pages hold the artwork of artists, mostly Indian, who painted the Southwest and the Native people living there. Bobby thinks this will make me happy, like I was before. But the IHS has scalped my insides, and I can only turn from Bobby, refuse his touch. My fingers feel no need to hold the brushes; I can't look at the canvas.

When Bobby disappears into the Indian bar at the edge of town, I take a black Sharpie to the pages of the art book, covering each page with the thoughts and images that won't leave my head, that consume my being.

And when my body is able to walk again, I leave Oklahoma to begin my quest. I wander into the desert of the Southwest. Bobby doesn't follow me.

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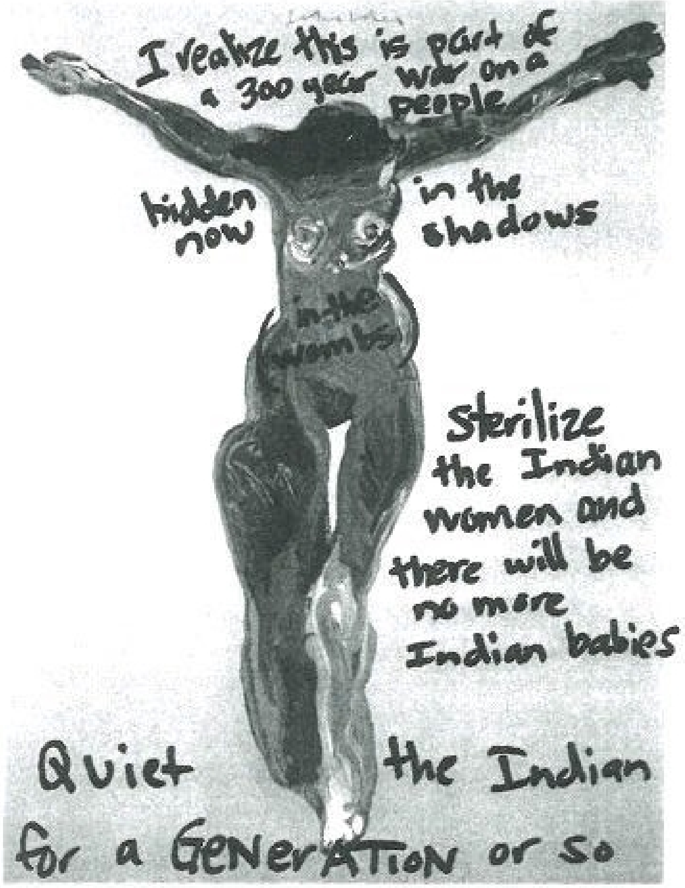
I realize this is part of a 300 year war on a people
hidden now
in the shadows
in the wombs
Sterilize the Indian women and there will be no more Indian babies
Quiet the Indian for a GENERATION or so

Appropriation of *Crucified Woman* by Fritz Scholder (1976).

IT HAPPENED TO OTHERS.

In a bar in Gallup, I meet a girl who, at barely fifteen, was told she was having her tonsils taken out. Instead, they removed her ovaries. She discovers it later, when she has married and is ready to start a family.

In Los Angeles, I meet a woman who, at twenty-six, sought a womb transplant because she had been having trouble getting pregnant. The doctors who sterilized her five years before told her that the hysterectomy was reversible.

I sing for all of us when I hum those lullabies sung to babies for generations, passed down through the female lineage like the hand-sewn blankets I grip with sad fingers and broken hands. Those blankets are the babies the wombs can no longer hold. These songs of pain rise up to the clouds, like rain in reverse.

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BOBBY PROVES HIMSELF A WARRIOR. He enlists in the army and serves in a one-year tour of Vietnam. He writes letters to me, mailed to my mother's house, which I find many years later, when I return from the desert to care for my mother, whom I'm losing one limb at a time to diabetes. Bobby's letters don't say much about combat, or the soldiers around him, and he doesn't talk about us. On pages yellowed by time, he writes of his discovery of the Montagnards, the small hill people of Vietnam. Bobby calls them the Indians of Vietnam, the aboriginal people living in the country way before the other Vietnamese. Bobby says they have their own dialect and dances.

I see Bobby at a pow wow in Anadarko shortly after my mother's death. The lanky basketball player has become a man heavy with failure. His cheeks droop towards the ground in a way that tells of the wounding of his soul.

We greet one another in a hug made awkward by time. I thank Bobby for his letters; he tells me he's sorry he missed my mother's funeral. Later that night I see him stumbling to the parking lot with a much younger woman under his arm, laughing and kicking crumpled, empty beer cans at their feet. I return to the house that belonged to my mother, to its white walls that feel like they might cave in on me if I stay too long.

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DURING MY QUEST, I FIND moments of solace in the desert, with the help of prayer smudges and peyote medicine and ceremonies. One night, I follow the fire as it stretches up towards the top of the teepee, and there, through the small opening at the top, I see a moon, full and alive with possibility. The fire in the middle of the teepee shines hot on my face and chest and I feel compelled to trace rough pictures into the dirt. By sunrise, I've told a complete story in the dirt surrounding the Pendleton blankets that have provided me a seat during the night.

I realize it is time to return to Oklahoma and to the Wichita Mountains that have always been my home.

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T. C. PAINTED A SYMBOLIC history of the Plains Indian people for the Daybreak Star Cultural Center in Seattle. Starting from the left edge, the painting is dark, only partially lit by a prairie fire and an ancient moon that illuminates a small clan of people who wander, lost in darkness and superstition. In the center, Mother Earth shines upon their land and offers gifts of buffalo and medicine. On the right side of the panel, there are three major figures, a sun dancer, a Kiowa peyote man, and a gourd dancer. When T. C. finished, he realized it was a mural rather than a painting. He wrote that a single painting was paint as lyricism, while telling a story through a mural was paint as an appendage of the soul.

The walls of my mother's house, which have haunted me since I returned from school, eighteen years old and pregnant, now pulse with a strange life force, teasing my furious need to paint, which began that night in the teepee with those dirt sketchings. I pull money from the envelope tucked beneath Mother's bed and buy canvass, brushes, and paint. I inhale the sweet linseed oil like a junkie, like it is holy water and might save my soul. I push the furniture out of the house, stacking the worn pieces alongside the road to be collected by the vultures that swarm, keeping watch over me, thinking I haven't been the same since It happened.

My not-so-nimble-fingers clasp the brushes as if afraid to let go again, and I paint. It begins with a small scene in the corner of Mother's living room, but soon expands into a larger story covering the entire wall. I cannot put the brushes down, I cannot stop, and I finish the living room, only to continue down the hall leading to the two bedrooms.

I forget to eat and I sleep only in forty-minute naps that come suddenly and unexpectedly, forced out of sheer exhaustion. When I wake, my hands, covered in paint and peeling from dryness, clutch the brushes and I begin again. I stop only when I cover the entire inside of my mother's small house with my story, my mural, an appendage of my soul.

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MY COUSIN IS T. C. Cannon. White people love his art and say he was the "Indian Van Gogh." Like my cousin, I paint Indians. On the walls of Mother's house, I paint the Indian babies my body could never hold. These painted children occupy the walls; four ghost babies hovering in a dark section of the mural, trapped in a motherless purgatory, their bellies knowing only hunger and separation. The darkness surrounding them is alcohol. Assimilation policies. Genocide. Their father hovers nearby, his sad cheeks melting towards the red-dirted ground. He is unable to face the children and trapped in a hellish darkness of his own. He won't let himself hear their screams.

My image lurks above my babies, forced to forever watch their suffering. The heart craves what it cannot have, the arms ache for what they can never hold, and the engorged breasts leak milk that might feed the thirsty mouths of my babies. If only.

I was once called Painter Girl, and like my cousin T. C., I paint Indians.