

Six words

by brni

Tom Spinoza looked up from his cappuccino and snorted. “That’s the worst possible haircut ever.” He rubbed his shaved scalp, along the long lateral scar that ran from temple to temple. “It’s some kinda reverse mohawk.” He laughed, not unkindly.

“It’s a double Mohawk.” The man in the blue T-shirt leaned over a little and lifted one side of his hair, exposing shaved sides. “But it joins up in the back.” He wore a sparse goatee, also neatly divided, echoing the strip of exposed scalp. Twin tufts of hair stood out in front of his ears, detached sideburns extending wispy tendrils. “I couldn’t reach any further,” he explained.

Not what I’d expected when I’d tailed Spinoza from his office in one of the more exclusive areas of the Main Line to this run-down java joint. And likely not what his wife expected either. But that was her problem, wasn’t it? I reached into my backpack for the small digital camera that Spinoza’s wife (“call me Anne,” she’d said, when we’d met, her handshake soft and warm, her face still a little flushed from her workout) had given me for the job, slipped it behind my book (Pynchon’s *Mason and Dixon* – yeah, I’d figured if I was on a stakeout, I might as well try getting through this thing again). I’d practiced with the damn thing for a while before I’d gotten it to work right. It was about the size of my thumb, or maybe a half-thumb larger, with tiny indentations that were apparently control buttons; it was obviously designed for the fingers of thirteen-year-old Japanese girls with years of Nintendo and Playstation experience, not for a six-foot tall, two hundred pound, going-on-fortyish American technophobe.

After messing with the thing for a bit, I managed to turn off the flash. It kept asking me if I really wanted to flash the BIOS. Obviously not. I’m trying turn off the flash. Damn thing is too smart, and starts up with the auto-flash on, every time. I’m not a professional detective, but it seems to me that you can’t be discrete with a flash.

I’d missed their discussion, messing around with the damned camera. A third party had joined them, sitting across from the man with crazy hair. She was young, college age, I’d guess, not a freshman. She was pretty, longish dark hair pulled into a ponytail, well-worn jeans, and a white t-shirt that proclaimed affiliation with some club I wasn’t aware of. Black bra. I wasn’t sure about the other guy – he could be the same age, or he could just look like a kid because of the hair. I don’t think he was wearing a bra.

The three of them were looking at something in a half-sized notebook and talking softly. The woman pointed her pencil at the paper, underlined something for emphasis (I’m guessing). My first snapshot caught the man with the crazy hair with his mouth open, finger raised. The second caught Spinoza looking at the woman’s breasts. The third was an off-center composition showing the corner of my book (the text reading: “here of the more visi- more pervasive, Town. Johanna and drawal from the Friv- with a diaphanous

Wimple back to their old Theatrics,”), cutting a ‘V’ into my empty coffee cup, vase of flowers tilting Pisa-like in the background. The fourth shot captured the woman’s face from profile. I palmed the camera and set down my book, making my way to the counter for my third refill. I figured I could get a different angle on the way back, and maybe, if I was lucky, get a shot of whatever it was that they were perusing.

But luck was not on my side. They were apparently done. Tom was standing up. The other guy had taken the notebook, slipping it into his waistband. He was smiling. Something had been accomplished, but I had no idea what. The woman stood up and tiptoed to give Spinoza a hug and a kiss on the cheek (she was shorter than I’d thought at first, must have been the angle). I snapped a couple quick, unaimed shots, left my cup at the counter and went to get my book and bag, figuring I could pretend I’d been planning to leave, in order to follow unobtrusively. But I moved too fast, and then there was nothing to do but go outside and wait while they wrapped things up.

A couple minutes later, as I feigned window-shopping in the closed electronics store next door, the three emerged, Spinoza first, holding the door for the other two. Snap, saved to disk. Someone set off fireworks, or at least that’s what it sounded like, a string of pops, a blur of movement, a scream. Snap, the man with the crazy hair, eyes wide, Spinoza diving to the side, the woman motionless. Snap, Crazy-Hair spinning, shirt red on blue, Spinoza rolling, the woman motionless. Snap, the pavement as I dove for cover. Snap, Crazy-Hair down on one knee, Spinoza behind a car, the woman grabbing at her arm. Snap, the back of a van as it careens around the corner, tires squealing.

Crazy-Hair was lying on the dirty pavement, gasping. Spinoza walked up to him.

“You poor fuck,” he said, shaking his head. Bending over, Spinoza yanked the notebook out of Crazy-Hair’s pants, then rolled him onto his stomach to get at his wallet. “Come on,” he said to the woman.

She stared at him, then down at dying man. I thought she was going to faint. “We’ve got to get him to the hospital,” she said. “Oh God, Bill, I’m so sorry.” She started to kneel down next to Crazy-Hair, next to Bill. Spinoza yanked her up by her wounded arm.

“Time to go, now.”

“Fuck you!” She pulled away, wincing.

He punched her in the stomach, hard, and she doubled over. Then he heaved her over his shoulder, carried her to his Mercedes SUV (which beeped at him as it unlocked) and threw her in the back seat. Nice thing about these little digital cameras – they fit lots of pictures and you don’t have to change the roll.

Bill lay on the ground outside the coffee shop. Someone tried to push the door open, but Bill was blocking it. They pushed and he groaned. I ran over and shoved it closed, kneeling against the side of the door to keep them from disturbing the man. “Call 911,

quick!” I shouted into the café. There were two small holes, ringed red, in his chest. A pool of blood was gathering under him, and when he coughed he sprayed a red mist. I swallowed bile. Last thing a dying man needs is someone throwing up on him.

“Goddamn,” he said, softly. “I’m dying. Who are you?”

“Uh...”

“Never mind. I wanna see naked chicks before I die. Can you set that up?”

“No. I don’t know any naked chicks. Sorry.”

“Damn.”

“Any idea who shot you? Or why?”

“No fuckin’ clue. Ask Spinoza, this was his deal. I was just providing the chickens.” He breathed in sharply. “Oh fuck.”

After that he started breathing in short, labored breaths, until his eyes defocused. I sat back against door and closed my eyes and waited for the police.