

A rich and moving novel about the price of the American dream by
"America's most imaginative contemporary novelist" —*NEWSWEEK*

the
tortilla
curtain



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1

AFTERWARD, HE TRIED TO REDUCE IT TO ABSTRACT terms, an accident in a world of accidents, the collision of opposing forces—the bumper of his car and the frail scrambling hunched-over form of a dark little man with a wild look in his eye—but he wasn't very successful. This wasn't a statistic in an actuarial table tucked away in a drawer somewhere, this wasn't random and impersonal. It had happened to him, Delaney Mossbacher, of 32 Piñon Drive, Arroyo Blanco Estates, a liberal humanist with an unblemished driving record and a freshly waxed Japanese car with personalized plates, and it shook him to the core. Everywhere he turned he saw those red-flecked eyes, the rictus of the mouth, the rotten teeth and incongruous shock of gray in the heavy black brush of the mustache—they infested his dreams, cut through his waking hours like a window on another reality. He saw his victim in a book of stamps at the post office, reflected in the blameless glass panels of the gently closing twin doors at Jordan's elementary school, staring up at him from his omelette aux fines herbes at Emilio's in the shank of the evening.

The whole thing had happened so quickly. One minute he was winding his way up the canyon with a backseat full of newspapers, mayonnaise jars and Diet Coke cans for the recycler, thinking nothing, absolutely nothing, and the next thing he knew the car was skewed across the shoulder in a dissipating fan of dust. The man must have

been crouching in the bushes like some feral thing, like a stray dog or bird-mauling cat, and at the last possible moment he'd flung himself across the road in a mad suicidal scramble. There was the astonished look, a flash of mustache, the collapsing mouth flung open in a mute cry, and then the brake, the impact, the marimba rattle of the stones beneath the car, and finally, the dust. The car had stalled, the air conditioner blowing full, the voice on the radio nattering on about import quotas and American jobs. The man was gone. Delaney opened his eyes and unclenched his teeth. The accident was over, already a moment in history.

To his shame, Delaney's first thought was for the car (was it marred, scratched, dented?), and then for his insurance rates (what was this going to do to his good-driver discount?), and finally, belatedly, for the victim. Who was he? Where had he gone? Was he all right? Was he hurt? Bleeding? Dying? Delaney's hands trembled on the wheel. He reached mechanically for the key and choked off the radio. It was then, still strapped in and rushing with adrenaline, that the reality of it began to hit him: he'd injured, possibly killed, another human being. It wasn't his fault, god knew—the man was obviously insane, demented, suicidal, no jury would convict him—but there it was, all the same. Heart pounding, he slipped out from under the seat belt, eased open the door and stepped tentatively onto the parched strip of naked stone and litter that constituted the shoulder of the road.

Immediately, before he could even catch his breath, he was brushed back by the tailwind of a string of cars racing bumper-to-bumper up the canyon like some snaking malignant train. He clung to the side of his car as the sun caught his head in a hammerlock and the un-air-conditioned heat rose from the pavement like a fist in the face, like a knockout punch. Two more cars shot by. He was dizzy. Sweating. He couldn't seem to control his hands. "I've had an accident," he said to himself, repeating it over and over like a mantra, "I've had an accident."

But where was the victim? Had he been flung clear, was that it? Delaney looked round him helplessly. Cars came down the canyon, burnished with light; cars went up it; cars turned into the lumberyard

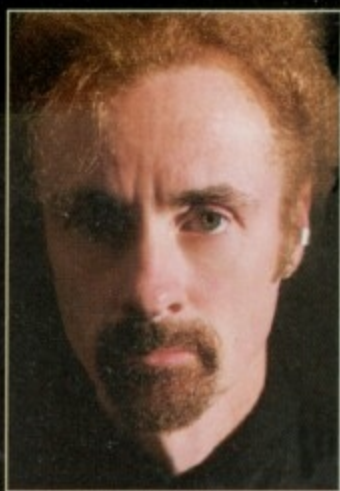
a hundred yards up on the right and into the side street beyond it, whining past him as if he didn't exist. One after another the faces of the drivers came at him, shadowy and indistinct behind the armor of their smoked-glass windshields. Not a head turned. No one stopped.

He walked round the front of the car first, scanning the mute unrevealing brush along the roadside—ceanothus, chamise, redshanks—for some sign of what had happened. Then he turned to the car. The plastic lens over the right headlight was cracked and the turn-signal housing had been knocked out of its track, but aside from that the car seemed undamaged. He threw an uneasy glance at the bushes, then worked his way along the passenger side to the rear, expecting the worst, the bleeding flesh and hammered bone, sure now that the man must have been trapped under the car. Stooping, palm flat, one knee in the dirt, he forced himself to look. Crescendo and then release: nothing there but dust and more dust.

The license plate—PILGRIM—caught the sun as he rose and clapped the grit from his hands, and he looked to the bushes yet again. "Hello!" he cried suddenly over the noise of the cars flashing by in either direction. "Is anybody there? Are you okay?"

He turned slowly round, once, twice, as if he'd forgotten something—a set of keys, his glasses, his wallet—then circled the car again. How could no one have seen what had happened? How could no one have stopped to help, bear witness, gape, jeer—anything? A hundred people must have passed by in the last five minutes and yet he might as well have been lost in the Great Painted Desert for all the good it did him. He looked off up the road to the bend by the lumberyard and the grocery beyond it, and saw the distant figure of a man climbing into a parked car, the hard hot light exploding round him. And then, fighting down the urge to run, to heave himself into the driver's seat and burn up the tires, to leave the idiot to his fate and deny everything—the date, the time, the place, his own identity and the sun in the sky—Delaney turned back to the bushes. "Hello?" he called again.

**“A compelling story of myopic misunderstanding
and mutual tragedy” —CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Topanga Canyon is home to two couples on a collision course. Los Angeles liberals Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher lead an ordered sushi-and-recycling existence in a newly gated hilltop community: he a sensitive nature writer, she an obsessive realtor. Mexican illegals Cándido and América Rincón desperately cling to their vision of the American Dream as they fight off starvation in a makeshift camp deep in the ravine. And from the moment a freak accident brings Cándido and Delaney into intimate contact, these four and their opposing worlds gradually intersect in what becomes a tragicomedy of error and misunderstanding.

“Succeeds in stealing the front page news and bringing it home to the great American tradition of the social novel . . . A book to appreciate as we peer at the faces of strangers outside our windows, and wall ourselves in.”
—*The Boston Globe*

“Lays on the line our national cult of hypocrisy. Comically and painfully he details the smug wastefulness of the haves and the vile misery of the have-nots.”
—Barbara Kingsolver, *The Nation*

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