

Drive

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Brandy is built like a country road - fat and ugly, covered in black cracking leather. He has a fist that can punch through concrete, or at least I believed him when he said he could. He could probably punch his whole body through a brick wall. There he would be, elbows out, boots planted and as the dust settled, his eyes would lock on me. I'd know he hated me.

Before I knew what skinhead meant, before I knew what they meant for me, I just knew Brandy as Brandy. Once, after looking at some bruises on my arm, he told me a story of how he ran away freshman year. His father, "old man" he had called him, had hit him over the head with the phone when he tried to call a runaway hotline. I tried not to look at his shaved head for scars, but I did, and they were there, red from above his ear to his neck. I rolled my sleeve down over my arm and thought, he shaved his head to show his scars.

That was sophomore year. This year, he runs with a pack. Teachers talk about how violence in the schools is up, but no one seems to notice it's Jews and Minority kids who get beat up. Brandy watches me when I walk through the

halls. He talks with me about society, about culture. I can't write him off as stupid.

"What race are you?" He asks me. It's a variation on the traditional skinhead line, "Are you an Aryan?"

"Nothing." I say and walk away.

The roads in Ohio stretch out forever. At 16, I drive them fast, like I'm fighting a battle. And with the tape playing, the road thumping by under my wheels, I feel like I'm winning.

My father's white. So is my mother. So there is no answer for Brandy, except the one he wants. But it's not so much that I hate saying I'm white to Brandy, as saying I get anything from my parents. I think these things as I drive. On my left I pass Temple Emanuel. This is one of the routes I drive into the country. And that's my mother's temple.

She converted several years ago, although she never told anyone in the family why. Or at least not me. When my grandfather calls on Friday nights, we are suppose to lie about where she is. I don't know if my Grandfather cares that his daughter is now Jewish, but people in my family tell each other as little as possible.

I don't know much about Judaism. I remember a friend's Bat Mitzvah. I knew the pages turned backwards and impressed all the other non-Jewish kids around me. But really all I know about Jewish law is that I'm not Jewish. Even though being Jewish is passed down from the mother, my mother doesn't count.

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David is new and from New York and I can't stop thinking about him. I first saw him in the hall, his locker is right next to mine. He is wiry and shorter than me, with dark hair and dark rimmed glasses. He isn't cute, but I don't really have a crush on him. I just think about him. He stares down guys two heads taller than him with some kind of New Yorker glare. I've tried talking with him a couple of times, but how do you make small talk with someone from New York? His mother knows my mother from Temple Emanuel, but I don't want him to know that connection.

After school, I am going to get into my car when I see David leave the building and head straight toward me. I stand there with the car door open. But then he sways and I see he is walking to his car about 20 feet from mine.

"What do you want from me?" I'd been staring at him. I look behind me for some distraction. Most of the other cars are gone.

"What do you want from me?" It's natural for him to be direct. It's like it's his accent or something. I think of saying a date.

"I, uh, didn't know I was staring."

"Well, that's all you do. Stare at me." I didn't know I did this. When had I stared at him?

"Uh, my mother knows your mother at Temple Emanuel."

"Yea, well, my mother and your mother are not friends so you can leave that alone." Is he insulting my mother? No one has ever insulted my mother to

my face before. What are you supposed to do when a New Yorker insults an Ohioian's mother.

"Well, I guess I don't like her much either."

"That's a terrible thing to say." He's not walking past me anymore but looking directly at me, surprise in his face and posture. "Terrible. How can you take something like that back once you have said it."

"I won't take it back."

I get in the car and drive away. In the rear view mirror I see him watching me.

Screw everything, I think. There is a highway just past the school and I take a fast right onto it. A few miles up, the highway starts losing lanes. At two lanes it winds close to the river. I take it fast with its bright, sharp turns. Trees flash by, the river is running back to where it came from. Ahead of me, I don't know where, is the river's source. It's beginning. Where do I belong? What is my accent?

When the road hits State Route 28 I know I have to turn back. Turning back is all I think about on so many drives. School is out. The library is closed. There isn't anywhere else to go but home. It's inevitable. I tell myself, after this tape has played through. I tell myself, after the trout farm. So I turn back.

And I regret it as soon as I pull into the driveway. I feel odd. I am in the kind of mood where you ask questions. I don't want to be in this mood around my parents.

The house is colder than my car. I try to be quiet, to head up to my room without being noticed, but my father appears, like he's been waiting for me. Jolly is what he does. I have learned what his different smiles mean, what each smile wants. He doesn't know I have some of his secrets, just that he wants mine.

He is already glazed, his face slightly red and puffy, his look faraway and alert. If I had come home earlier, I would be prepared, know what was coming. But I am walking in cold. I try to take things in. The reflection in the picture frame shows my mom already passed out on the couch, her slipper holding on to one toe. My brother's door is closed, but he's home. Whatever my father wants, he doesn't want it from my brother.

"Stayed late at school working on a project." Cheerful. "Stopped by White Castle for dinner." No fear. "It's such an interesting project, I really have to get going on it." I am too energetic to break. I am a moving target. "It's going to be a long night with homework." It is just a question of getting up so many stair steps, then I'll be in my room. If I can just get out of sight he might drink it off.

"Come in here." I smell fury on him. "I've been waiting for you." Mixed with bourbon "I want to show you something." His face is a smile and his eyes eat me up. His hand is on my shoulder before I make it up the first step. There is no hope of getting to my room. Whatever he has in mind, it is going to happen. I feel the car keys in my pocket. How bad will it be? The hand on my shoulder moves to a grip on my arm.

“In here.” He walks me into the family room, with my mother snoring rhythmically. “I want to talk with you about repentance.”

He picks up the flogger on the table. “Some men repent by asking God for forgiveness.” I know this story. “Some men ask those who they have hurt to forgive them.” My uncle had brought the flogger back from his military duty in Iran, where he had watched men repeatedly beating their own backs. “Some men beat their breast and wail.” When my uncle died, my father took the flogger. “All of these acts, are sanctioned by their community.” I had seen it before in the attic, held the small chains in my hand. “What is brutal in one country is expected in another.” The chain had felt gentle on my hand, like silk. “Everyone needs this from their community.” Each link connects to two others. “It gives them a sense of belonging.” A fist of metal silk. “Everyone needs somewhere to belong.” It comes down hard on the side of my face. “You understand me,” he bends down, speaking in low tones. “You understand who you belong to?” My mother keeps snoring.

Over the night, the sun sets in my eye. I stay up doing physics homework, then math, then American lit. My eye darkens to gray in patches, then the worst spots turn purple with red flaming at the edges. The colors grow out of each other, swelling and intense, and then collapse into black.

At school the next day, there are questions. I tell everyone it was a bike accident. When I was a child, I had hoped these lame stories might get a teacher’s attention. I had watched After School Specials about child abuse and seen caring

teachers sit children down and ask in sincere voices if it was really true that they had fallen. I was ready and willing to burst into tears if anyone had asked. Over time I realized it wasn't worth the wait.

In second period, Brandy has physics class with me. I sit one seat behind him. He's smart but he doesn't study like I do. He looks at me, not into my eyes, but at my eye. "Who hit you?"

"I fell."

He looks away a minute. Then looks back. "You tell me who hit you and I'll kick his ass."

"I fell off my bike."

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During the summer, my mom asked me to do childcare at Temple Emanuel on Yom Kippor. I said yes, but now that it's really time to do it and I don't want to. The gray is mostly gone from my eye, you only see it if you look for it. I have never been around many children, but I don't think I am very good with them.

"So like what do I do with them?" I ask my mom in the car. We had been driving along in silence.

"What?" my mom says startled.

"What do I do with the kids. Don't they want to play or something?"

My mom shakes her head. "Don't interrupt me when I am thinking."

I go to the back room where some kids are already gathered. One of the last parents to drop off their children asks for the sign up list, and only then do I realize that I don't know who any of the children's parents are.

Down the hall, I hear music. It is faint. I can't think of any activities for the kids, but some of them brought games. There is this one small boy in the corner crying. I stall with the older kids until they are busy with the game, then I sit down with the little boy. He is smaller than he looks. I had thought he was four, but he is probably under three. I wonder how easy it would be to hurt him. I look at his deep wet eyes. Would the girls tell on me. He is so little here in this back room. I wonder what Brandy would do with him. The boy starts crying harder. He starts screaming. A girl playing cards starts to cry. I just stare at the boy, wondering what would happen if I touch him.

An older girl taps my shoulder and I snap out of something. Her face is a question. I look at the boy, who's gagging from crying so hard. I look up at the girl. "I didn't touch him."

"Can you make him stop crying?"

Inside my head something starts cracking. The boy gets up and runs out the door he'd seen his mom leave through. I follow his toddler run and take him into the bathroom. I wash my face while he screams, bouncing up and down, eyes closed, fists in the air. I am going to have to get his mother.

I leave him in the bathroom and walk toward the sanctuary. The doors are heavy and closed. The wood is dark and I think if I touch it, they will stain me. I want to rub my hand along the grain. Down the hall the boy is gagging and wailing. What will I break if I go in and am not welcome?

On the other side of the door, they all start singing. But it's not even like singing, but like asking. I put my hand on the door like your supposed to feel for a fire. How do they know how to make longing so beautiful? My chest hurts. The song wants something but I don't know what it is asking for. I don't even know the language. The whole sanctuary is singing. They all know the words. I think, could they be praying?

Down the hall the boy is raggedly gasping for breath. I move my hand to the latch and go in. I don't breathe so maybe whatever I am intruding on won't be disturbed. A couple mothers see me and get up right away. David sees me. His eyes are perplexed.

The boy's mother picks him up and he calms down right away. He starts humming to himself, burying his face in his mother's shoulder. She looks at me, she really looks deep into me and says, "Did you try holding him?" And I look at the ground and think, you would allow me to touch him?

After services, David finds me. "So, you're here to do child care?"

I can't look at him. He wasn't born knowing that song, but he was born able to know it.

"Yea." I can't think what to say. I can't shake the sound of the boy crying.
The mother's look. The song.

"So, I thought I would come say, you know, hello." He trails off looking at me.

I brace my spine and look at him. What can I say to him? "Hello."

"Well, uh, ok." He says and backs away.

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All the next week, my insides churn. On Friday, I wait for the bell to ring, for something to change. But when the bell rings I just go to my locker. The bright light outside makes the hallway dim. Locker doors slam around Brandy and his pack. His head's down, but he's not looking at the floor, eyes piercing the walls. His friends rotate, boots kicking the swept floor. Brandy doesn't move.

He's doing his lecture. He spews words, Jew. Black. Mexican. Jap. Jew. They sound like slurs when he says them, but they won't get him in trouble with the school. Students flash by on their way out the bright door. Brandy's eyes snake up from the floor to meet mine. The hall is dark, a tunnel, Brandy's after school lair.

"Jews aren't white because they can't blush." He looks at me to respond. I try to imagine David blushing. I can't. I can't imagine my mother blushing either.

“I’ve never seen you blush, Brandy.” One guy standing with Brandy giggles but then stops quickly. Brandy stares at me, sizing me up.

“I was just talking about how you can tell a Jew.”

I start shaking slightly under my clothes. “It’s by the mother. It’s passed down through the mother.” I hate hearing how he says Jew.

“You mean through the Jewess?” The little fire burning in me catches and ignites. I look at his eyes and realize that he has been studying me. All the time I’ve known him, he’s been studying me. When I was taking notes in physics, he was taking notes on me, on the guys that swarmed around him. I am not going to look away. I am not going to lose to him.

“I’m Jewish.”

I flex the muscles in my arms, through my back. I am a rock. My eyes lock on him. My eyes are steel. I want him to see nothing except what I offer. “My mother is Jewish. That means I am Jewish.”

I look for any reaction from Brandy but he gives nothing away. He’s busy, thinking, changing. Then his body hunches up as the muscles in his back tense. His arms coil slightly and he steps forward and back with separate feet. He has nothing left in this moment but to hurt me.

I will not shake. I will not. My face doesn’t twitch. I don’t breathe faster. No one moves. I feel filled with fire.

“I’m leaving now Brandy.” I turn my back to him first. Then walk away. Around the first corner, I start breathing. The fire inside me crackles. I feel tall.

“You are not Jewish.” A voice harsh and angry. And from New York.
“Your mother converted at a reform synagogue. I bet you’ve never even talked with Rabbi Goldman about converting.” He must have heard me and Brandy and waited for me here. I have nothing to say.

“It’s stupid to announce yourself as Jewish to a bunch of skinheads just because you don’t have anything else to be.” I can’t look at him.

In the bathroom, I push my hands together to stop them from shaking. I have seen my mother shake like this, when she talks to herself and locks herself in her bedroom for hours. I have to stop shaking.

What the fuck was I thinking. I’m such an idiot. I leave the bathroom for my car. The hallways feel like they are watching me. Everything in the school is quiet and empty. Outside the trees are starting to turn and everything is bleached out from the bright sun. Bright and cold. I’m such an idiot.

I drive out past Temple Emanuel and can't look at it. I didn't even know if they were praying or singing. I didn't know anything about it. David knew. Like I'm even Jewish.

I drive for a while but don't feel better. I pull into my driveway and head up the walk. And stop. A swastika has been carved into the bricks of my house. My spine turns to ice. I turn slowly to see who is watching this. I feel someone must want to see how scared I will get. I don't see anyone.

I pick up a hose from the side of the house and bring it to the front. The water snakes through the air, waving side to side. I am shaking again. I dropped

the hose on my feet, letting the water gush onto my shoes. I leaned against the house, pushing my hands together. I'm such an idiot.

Water doesn't help. It was carved with a knife or some kind of metal. There is no way to hide it, four feet wide, across the front of our house.

No one mentions it that night. My dad comes home early, while it is still light out. I listen as my mom comes and goes through the door, but no one notices. A week later my brother's friend Jack comes by to see him. "You have some lines drawn on the front of your house."

"It's a swastika."

"You see here, where someone carved something, its not writing or nothing. I can't tell what it is." He tries to point out the lines.

"I said its a swastika. You know like Nazis. Like Hitler."

He looks at me, his eyes narrow on my chin. I had almost slept with him in middle school when my brother let me get drunk with the rest of his friends. Jack had seemed interested in me then. Now he looks at me like he doesn't remember my name.

"Why did you carve a swastika on your house?"

Swastikas start appearing everywhere at school. On a sign I put up announcing a French club meeting. On the cover of my schoolbooks. David is at his locker when I first see it drawn in black on my locker. He slams his locker door and turns to me, his jaw set off to one side.

"I didn't mean for it to be like this." I say. I stare at his shirt.

“Don’t apologize to me,” he says. But I am sorry. I watch him walk away. I want to tell him again that I am sorry. I feel sorrier than I have words for. I have something more to say to him, or really, to ask him. But I don’t know what it was.

My brother starts having trouble with the skinheads, too. I guess he told my dad because that night he comes in to my room and says he wants to show me something. Out of his pants he pulls a thick dull gun. He caresses it, in his slightly drunk stupor. “Dad inherited this from Uncle Rich. Do you know what it is?”

“It’s semi-automatic,” I say, “and it’s old.”

“It’s a Mauser.” He says running his hand across its art deco lines. “An SS weapon.”

I go downstairs and find my dad. I look him in the eye. “You’re giving your son Nazi weapons?” Behind me my mother snores.

“That’s right.”

I pointed to the couch. “Our mother is Jewish.” I never talk this way. My dad sits back in his chair, looking through me.

“In this world there are Jews and there are Nazis. During World War II, six million Jews died. Went like sheep. And at some point you are going to have to decide if you are a Jew or if you are a Nazi.”

I am neither. I leave the room, take the stairs two at a time, past my brother lying on his back stroking the gun, and into my room. I grab my keys

and I am out. Past the Temple, the Drive-in, the trout farm. The tape loops back on itself and I lose count. Driving. Pushing. Fighting. I will not turn around, I say over and over to myself, though I know I will. Fifteen thousand years ago Ohio was covered in glaciers. They pushed all the hills to the edge of the state, leaving scraped up boulders and shallow lakes. The ice had been a mile thick here. The horizon stretches out to infinity. Out there, I think, out there is where I will turn around.

I go to school in the same clothes I wore the day before. Lots of girls notice. I don't know what is next with the skinheads, but I want it now. I can see my plan in my head. They will circle me, knock me to the ground, kick me with their steel toes. But what they don't know is that this doesn't scare me. I will get through it and this straight A student will see them expelled. In jail.

I think about David all the time. I keep hoping there is a way to win this. I think then, things would be different. He would see me differently.

At the end of the day, Brandy is waiting by my locker. "I want to show you something." His eyes squint on me. I am ready. I follow him to a delivery platform behind the cafeteria. And scream. Against the wall, already dazed, is David, bleeding from his head, his nose. One guy is holding him against the wall, the others are hitting him. I leap on them. Impotent punches, screaming.

Three guys laugh and back away. Brandy kneels down. "Don't fuck with me, you fucking Jew." And they are gone.

I look over at David. He is on the ground, holding himself up with his arms, his head down.

“Uh, David...?”

His head snaps up. “Don’t you fucking apologize to me.”

I help David up. In the men’s room, I grab a few paper towels and David braces himself against the sink and starts to sob. It is only for a minute, but I can’t move listening to him. I hold the brown coarse paper towels to his head until the bleeding stops. We don’t say much. I start to explain about my expulsion revenge plan. He waves it away. I offer to take him for a ride, to get his mind off things, he shakes his head. I walk him to his car and then go to mine.

I drive like the earth is turning under me. I look ahead for some place where I belong, and it is at the horizon, at the source of the river, where the glaciers came from. And the road is beautiful, nettles and dead trees against harvested cornfields. Ahead of me the road stretches out, not promising escape, but promising to go on forever.