

Killing Nazis

Mike pulls his Volvo station-wagon into the McDonald's driveway in pursuit of a caffeine bump with his 20 month old boy sweet-eyed asleep in the Britax car-seat behind him. He's not supposed to get him to nap driving around but desperation sets after two hours of crib-shrieking. If he can cruise through this drive-thru, grab a coffee, the baby will most likely stay asleep. Any cooing or fidgets, there's a freeway onramp around the corner and the 405's strum should knock him out in no time. He's in a first-person-shooter dropping into occupied France with the rest of the 101st, watching parachutes unfurl and gunfire spark below. "Be quick, don't hurry!" his high school basketball coach cited John Wooden. Advice from everywhere.

When he pulls the wheel right, his shoulder aches where he used it for a pillow last night, sleeping on the ground next to his son's crib. His wife would freak at the idea of him eating McDonald's, with her grass-fed, non-gmo, baby-food from scratch, but he just wants a coffee after all-night-sleep-training the baby, allowing his wife a decent night's rest and enough energy for her to complete the last few laps on the partnership track at Douche-nozzle & Associates.

He is tempted though. McDonald's cheeseburgers take him back to pit stops with his mother on road trips through Virginia during her two weeks of summer visitation. His mom now calls him *Mr. Mom*.

"You spent a lot of time and money in law school to be Mr. Mom."

When his wife was six months pregnant, he hired a contractor to convert their detached garage's bonus room into a home office. Most nights, he retreats to this office when his wife gets home, but completes only his most urgent work, which is rapidly dwindling, before decompressing in front of his computer with internet porn and Nazi killing.

The drive-thru line splits in two but the left lane is occupied by a van, not a mini-van but a full-sized van, flailing teen-age body parts inside, female, bare legs and ponytails. Surely a sports team, Mike remembers those game day trips, without the females but definitely the fast food and confirms when a field hockey stick pokes from one of the hinged windows. Mike slides the Volvo into the right-lane just as a white Nissan pulls forward. Abreast the speaker and glowing three-paneled menu, he thinks this coffee extraction could not be going more smoothly if it was executed by Navy SEALs. *Target down, clear barrels.*

"Would you like to try our all new Chicken-Bacon-Parmesan Sandwich?" a female voice flirts over the drive-thru speaker clear as if it were coming through the Bose system in his car.

"No thanks, just a coffee, please," he says, checking on his son through a system of mirrors, a fish-eyed reflector below his rear-view and then one mounted on the top of the second-row seat, to which his son's backwards-facing car-seat is latched. The baby continues to slumber but his head is pointing left rather than right as it was minutes ago. Or is it now pointing *right*? He's unsure with all the mirrors.

In response to his coffee order, feedback crackles at him followed by a new voice, a teen-aged girl's snarky soprano gnarled by the drive-thru sound system. Mike wonders why and how McDonald's decided to make its pre-recorded, pre-order up-sell, cheese and pork disaster crystal clear while leaving the inevitable human interaction to obsolete technology.

"Hello, can I help you?"

"Just a coffee, please." His son's head is now pointing the same direction as when he pulled into the drive-thru line.

"What size?"

"Medium." The driver of the van in the adjacent lane is alternately yelling orders into the speaker and the vehicle's back.

"We only have large and small," the female voice concludes.

"Large please." Mike forces through his teeth.

"Do you want cream and sugar?" she asks.

"Cream, please." Baby eyelashes are fluttering behind him.

"Any sugar?" she asks, maintaining her cadence. From the van, he hears a discussion regarding the McRib and whether it is currently in-season.

"No, just cream, please."

"How many?" He's not sure how to respond, doesn't know the standard quantification of cream with respect to coffee. Is it ounces, cups or something metric? She's probably got a script either in front of her or committed to memory, he thinks, calming himself. She's not trying to fuck with him.

"How many of the little containers?" he asks, encouragingly. Escaping him is the name of the capsules of half-and-half diners deliver by the dozen as though the bored and/or lazy waitresses refilled your cup enough to use that many, none of which have expiration dates. He knows he's used ones that have managed to stay in circulation for months by the luck of the draw as the cream turns into putrid snowflakes atop his coffee mug.

"Little containers?" she asks. She probably has no non-McDonald's interaction with coffee, doesn't even drink it but surely she's been to restaurants, seen her parents drink coffee. Every Starbucks is sardined with teen-agers but they're all drinking triple-mochachino-latte bullshit. Her parents are probably divorced but her estranged father takes her to neon-restaurants that serve breakfast 24 hours a day. They don't talk and when the waitress comes around she won't order and when her dad tries to suggest something she loved eight years ago she says, "Um, do you even know how many carbs are in French Toast, Brian?"

"You know the little plastic containers with milk with the paper top you pull back," he's hanging out the side of his wagon raising his voice into the speaker, assuming that's where the microphone is. "Creamers!" he remembers.

"Our cream comes out of a machine, sir." Her voice doesn't have any attitude, whatever spikiness he hears is attributable to McDonald's sub-par audio .

"One please," he chooses the smallest integer, thinking he can always add more.

"Do you want it in your coffee, sir?" The Volvo has been still too long, his son's arms and legs probe their vicinity, seeking orientation. He considers backing out with the white Nissan still stuck at the first window. He adjusts his rear-view mirror so he can actually see what's behind his car instead of a triptych of his first born. A black F-150 looms behind, its grill filling the rear-view, the rest taking up the side mirrors. If Darth Vader moved to Lancaster after dropping out of Jedi school this is what he would drive.

"Yes, put it in the coffee," he shrills, whatever it takes to end the conversation. Why the hell didn't he just order it black? The van lurches forward as though the driver has flexed his right ankle off the brake allowing the V-8 one yard of leeway before stopping, leaving a rapidly shrinking window, but a window nonetheless, for him to slip into.

"Anything else, sir?"

"That's it," he screeches, watching the van veer in front of him, towards the first window, around hedges being manicured. A Latino with a sword-like trimmer, an extra-long chainsaw essentially, the combustion penetrating the near air-tight Volvo cabin, choking him with the aromas of his youth: lawn-mower exhaust, gas-ration lines and freshly cut grass. His son's eyes drop to half-mast with the minimal motion and not the carbon monoxide, hopefully.

Mike lets the station-wagon idle to within inches of the van to maximize the distance traveled to keep his son in the half-state in which he currently appears to be hovering. The van pays for its gargantuan order, mammoth bags necessarily held with two hands across the window-vehicle chasm, swifter than expected. The van then lives the dream he hoped to realize: a swift payment at the first window followed by a moving grab at the second and onto a major thoroughfare. Before he can move his car forward, a wiry young man walks, struts really, in front, putting his left hand on top of the right-front corner of his station-wagon, like he needs a point of leverage to make such a sharp turn, as though his car is more of a Jersey-pike. The violation makes him think of high school basketball practice. *When someone comes through your zone you let him know*, his coach had always told them. If someone cuts through the key you bump them with an elbow or a knee, a hip or shoulder the second time. He's wearing a San Francisco Giants cap. Across the flat-brim is a 59/50 New Era sticker.

The kid sidles in, never looks back to acknowledge he's cut the line. Has he technically cut the line? What's the etiquette for pedestrians in drive-thrus? Mike lets his car pull forward a few feet unsure of how much space to give a pedestrian in a drive-thru line. The kid rests both his elbows on the metallic ledge, cranes his head, a chicklet smile towards the kitchen or whatever that space inside a McDonald's is called, thick hair spilling out the back of his cap. His eyes squint then widen, chin protruding, like he's acknowledging old friends and introducing himself to unfamiliar faces.

The kid's ass is spilling backwards into the drive-thru lane, Under Armour underwear extending six inches above his skinny jeans that are pulled taut mid-butt by a studded belt. A girl's head gravitates outside towards the boy, her blond pig-tails framing her heart-shaped face. She looks at his lips when he talks, uncaring her line of cars is making no progress. Visa, Mastercard and American Express stickers are attached to the bullet-proof bay-window.

Mike wants to honk at them but fears turning his son's whines into shrieks. The kid exhibits no intention of wrapping up his conversation. Mike decides there's plenty of room to get around the kid and pay for his coffee at the second window. If McDonald's can produce a sexy, pre-recorded

enticement for vein-clogging sandwiches surely they'll accept his two dollar payment fifteen feet from the bad-boy poser making eyes at this debutante so her daddy will pay attention to her.

When Mike pulls the Volvo around the kid, he remembers how he'd make a run at a jump shooter like he was going to take him out before veering to the side, sneak a foot where he was going to land. The kid never looks up, just keeps talking to the girl. He turns the wheel a half-second before he needs to, relishing the idea of a little scare. No harm no foul. Maybe the kid will hear his tires squeak, like a high-top on newly mopped hardwood. He coasts towards the first window when he hears a thud from the back of his car.

He looks into his side-view mirror, sees a concavity to his rear quarter-panel, the kid pulling a hammered fist back from the very same concavity. The kid's glaring at the mirror, at him. Mike takes umbrage at the assault on his car. He didn't try to hit the kid, never even came close. Yes, he cut it a little but the kid couldn't know he did it on purpose. Mike flings open his door, kneeing his way out. The kid is walking towards him, striding like he's about to start running. Mike is standing in the wood-chips, middling the first and second drive-thru windows. His car door abuts the stuccoed side of the McDonald's, removing paint, causing divots he'll later notice and claim as damage in addition to the more purposeful dent.

At 6'4", Mike has almost a foot and near a hundred pounds on this kid. Mike expects a basketball fight. Two guys walk towards each other, their chests bump and two teams separate them while yelling profanities at each other. "Fuck you!" "No, fuck you!" In a high school game, he'd flipped the other team's forward over his hip and onto his back battling over the low block after their arms had become intertwined, just a result of a shift in leverage, nothing malicious. Yeah, maybe Mike had done some talking during the game, gotten under his skin a bit. The kid, built about the same as him, all knees and elbows, popped up, throwing haymakers into the middle space between them before they were separated. Since then, he'd had two more rhubarbs, both on the court, one in a rec-league game with reversible jerseys, the other a pick-up games, shirts and skins. He'd been a skin, his stomach hairier and farther over the waistband of his shorts than he remembered. He declined the other guys offer to "take it outside," even taken a retaliatory elbow on the next play but he was an adult by then. The guy might have a gun in his car.

This kid doesn't say anything just keeps moving at him with orange eyes. Mike steps into him when he's about two feet out like he used to do when he was going to draw a charge but just expects a chest-collision from which, by the laws of physics, he will come out on top, when there's a hot sting in his left ear and the kid is pulling back a clenched fist. Adrenalin pumps preventing the sensation of pain but the shock this guy he's just met, this kid, is hitting him. He tries to process. He's having a fight with a juvenile two feet away from his, fully conscious, howling, infant child. The kid, with fist re-cocked, looks to deliver another blow, clearly nowhere near his first fight, his face inches away from Mike's, breath smelling like cherry Jolly Rancher.

Mike closes his eyes, lowers his head, reaches out with both hands, getting two fistfuls of t-shirt. Instinctively, he pulls the kid towards him (as opposed to executing the first move of an MMA submission hold, two taps on the left arrow, hold down the red square), standing him up, looking into his eyes. The kid's upper lashes curl to touch the skin on the underside of his eye sockets, the lower to the top of his cheek. His baby's eyelashes do this. It's the lashes he'll use to distinguish the kid's face from the others in the police folder, youthful faces as identical as those composing the squads of Wehrmacht that charge his machine gun positions late at night. The kid isn't trying to hit him anymore, just staring at him, judging him.

Mike lifts the boy off the ground and chest-passes him into the second window's adjacent wall. The boy flies farther than expected. Wood-chips scatter as the kid's ironic Jack Purcell's try, without avail, to find purchase. The kid skitters to a stop, collects himself, smirking at Mike the whole time, hoisting himself up as Mike hears his toddler from the backseat of the Volvo. Mike flails at the rear-door handle, planning to unclasp the chest latch and three-point seatbelt, extract his baby and hold him in his arms, leg-bounce him until he's soothed. The kid hops into the passenger side of the raised, black pick-up, while Mike still struggles with the rear-door handle.

"Move your fucking car before we drive over it!" the kid yells out the passenger window, before hollering something to his friend behind the wheel. The Giants hat lies between his feet amongst the wood chips. Even though the Ford has monster-truck ambitions there's no way it could drive over his station-wagon but Mike puts it at about 50/50 he might get his friend to try.

"I'm moving it," Mike mumbles at them, while in contradiction opening the rear door to get at his baby to give him his rightful attention. That his son is likely safer inside the car in his European engineered, molded seat doesn't occur to him.

The truck's revs and bounces diminish before shuddering to a stop as Mike sees the driver staring at the cap. He pushes the red button over his son's crotch that releases the infant-seat's center prongs. The baby retracts his hands from the straps then reaches towards his father, all baby-fat and big eyeballs. Mike grabs him under the armpits and pulls him to his chest before shifting him to his hip around which his son sends both legs before laying his head against Mike's side. Mike savors the full weight of his baby's head against his side before squatting down, keeping his son upright, grabbing the Giants cap from the wood chips. At this level, Mike can see the wood chips are synthetic. Standing up, he holds the brim at eye-level, appreciating the precise machine-made, orange S and F, intertwined. Mike spins it in his hand, holding the brim, offering it at the truck. His son is hysterical on his arm, sucking great gasps of air in between high-decibel wails. The truck lurches, as the clutch is released out of sync, then stilled by a stomp on the brake as neutral is found. The driver's side door slings open. This second boy drops down, the chrome step too high to be helpful. His eyes deliver a placating look, hoping to retrieve the hat that clearly belongs to him, trying to convey regret he ever let his friend wear it in the first place.

Mike feels warmth on half his neck. He sets the cap on the roof of his car and reaches into the lower pocket of his cargo pants, his "daddy pants" as his wife calls them, removing a baby-wipe, that he puts to his ear. When he pulls the wipe away it's all red. Mike wads it up and tosses it into the wood-chips before grabbing the cap from the top of his car.

Mike looks at the hat and thinks about pulling it away from the kid as he reaches for it. It would be a small thing but those hats aren't cheap and he'd get to see this kid's sad eyes knowing he's not getting his \$45 cap back without a fight and this time he'd be ready. He'd put this kid in the hospital. Fuck the consequences.

And then Mike realizes this has got to be over, finally answers the question of how he has got himself and his son in this situation. He leans forward, extending the cap with his right hand, keeping his baby boy as far away as he can, and this kid accepts it with his right hand. If not for the cap in the middle and the lack of an ocean, they'd look like they were reaching across the bows of two ships to shake hands. The next morning this other kid will see Mike's bloody fingerprints on the bottom and top of the brim. He'll be conflicted over whether his mom can get the stain out and if he can produce a plausible explanation.

Mike puts his son back into his car-seat then enters the Volvo himself and turns the ignition. His son calms down just feeling the purr. He pulls forward enough for the F-150 to peel-out of the drive-thru, hanging a sharp right onto Riverside Boulevard, middle-fingers and profanity blazing from both windows.

“Here’s your coffee. Would you like to call the police, sir?” the girl with the heart-shaped face asks but he only hears it out of his right ear. Adrenalin-shaking hand, he presses a middle finger to his left ear where a buzz is originating, wanting to release the feeling of pressure like he’s got water trapped in it.