

Twin

by J. E. Cammon

Brandon had never liked standing in line; it was a childish tendency he had never grown out of. What likely annoyed him the most was likely the stillness, the lack of motion despite everyone else's insistence that they were getting somewhere. And it was slow, too, especially tonight. Everyone was in line, dressed in their best blacks, slimmed and withdrawn for mourning. Everyone had to have their own chance to grieve, while keeping it moving; they only had the place rented for three hours. I was the only one present that could observe the subtle dance with even a tinge of humor, of light-heartedness, and still I could begin to somewhat understand Brandon's long-time obsession with not standing in line. There was something I was missing, and I wanted to know what it was. Right then.

Finally we reached the casket together, behind a woman sobbing entirely too loudly whom I did not even recognize, and a short man who had shaken with emotion, but had made very little noise. And they had been right, all those people having conversations above our heads. You didn't look anything like yourself when you died. I looked still, frozen almost, unnaturally colored and fake. The room had gone silent a moment before the noise returned. Screaming. Thunder. These things persisted for me, but I knew Brandon couldn't hear the things I heard. I could see behind him all the weepy faces and short prayer. The one line Brandon had suffered all the way through in his entire life was for a ride no one ever wanted to take. I could chuckle about it, there in that weightless numbness, but he had always said I had an odd sense of humor.

"Chris," he said quietly, and I stopped laughing. He was right. It was a somber moment, and I stayed quiet. Except for the screaming and the thunder. Brandon needed something to do with his hands so he put them in his pockets and jangled his keys around, as if searching for words. He stepped to the side quickly and suddenly as

if coming back to his senses, understanding that he was taking up too much time. In the front left pew half a dozen people rose up slowly, their faces sad. Two men, four women. One of the men waited until he was half past, and patted him on the back gently, told him it would be alright. The other stood in front of him, so he walked into the hug straight on. It was open, exposing the man's chest, and enveloping Brandon. He kept his hands in his pockets and put his ear to the red tie, as if searching for a heart. Neither was my father, though expectation had become an oddly distant thing lately for me. It was hard to feel, even hurt. The women all had the same reaction, a combination of leading and speaking kind words. The Lord's words. Brandon nodded as was his upbringing; nod even if it doesn't make any sense, had been the lesson. I could tell by the set of his feet that his objective was the side entrance straight ahead. He didn't want to walk all the way around the side, and get more uncomfortable treatment. After the last woman, everyone else saw his intent too, and no one stopped him. I looked down into the casket at myself and wondered who dressed me. It looked like one of Brandon's suits. When he opened the door I was compelled to follow, so I did. I still wanted to understand.

Brandon shuffled through the parking lot packed with affluence: expensive cars parked illegally. I saw Mr. Jenkins' car, the one he kept under the cover in his garage all day, the one he only drove to church. Reverend Williams' Cadillac was there, too, though I hadn't seen him inside. Brandon wasn't amazed though, just moving forward with his head down until he reached the street. Then he moved down the sidewalk until he reached his old Hyundai. The windows were down, streams of smoke coming from the passenger window. He opened the driver's side door and sat down heavily. He wasn't a very big person by most standards, but he drove a tiny, tiny car. I could see his friends inside, two of them at least. I didn't know their names, or any derivation of their false ones and I didn't much know their type. The one in the passenger seat looked over at Brandon and moved subtly, and I could hear the crunch of a paper

bag. He proffered a bottle, which Brandon took and put to his lips. The one in the back breathed as if to speak.

“My brother ain't drink,” Brandon said, then he tilted the bottle back. That was untrue. Well, I had tasted alcohol before, and it was pretty bad. It seemed more like a test of how much you could hurt yourself than anything else, but I was never sure. Brandon swallowed and swallowed and swallowed. I knew with that much it must have burned all the way down. He jerked forward, spilling some on his tie. My tie.

“Easy, folk,” and his friend put his hand out to prevent him from moving forward, but didn't touch him. Brandon nodded, his eyes watering, and handed the bottle back. He tried putting the keys into the ignition without wiping his eyes. Then he tried again. Eventually he got the car started.

“Where we goin'?” the one in the back asked, snapping his fingers for the bottle, and taking a drag from something he was smoking.

“The hospital,” Brandon responded, and he sniffled. He wiped his nose and snorted as if he were congested and rolled the wheel towards the street and then sped away from the funeral home.

He seemed to drive as fast as he could and as loud. At stop lights he stared into whoever's car was around, not blinking until the light turned green, and then he would speed off. I hoped he didn't get a speeding ticket. I hadn't had much money and he had less than me. I think I had asked him once about how he could afford a car, and he had responded that it wasn't what one knew, but who. Since he had a car and I didn't, I always had to cede the point.

The hospital was a new one, but it had gained that unkempt air about it, much like the mall or the supermarket, in a short time. It didn't look like hospitals on the television dramas and no one seemed as busy. My brother parked his car in the back, and told his friends to stay. They didn't object; it seemed like they had plenty of things to do to entertain themselves. Their eyes asked though: what was in the hospital. But Brandon's mouth didn't tell. On the walk across the parking lot, he stared at the liquor stain on my tie and smeared it with spit on his thumb. He straightened and tightened it

as if trying to look presentable. He walked inside, and questioned the first person at the first desk for a Margo Cooksey. I knew that name, but trying to recall why summoned up the thunder and screaming. The man pointed out elevators down the hall and listed instructions from there. He walked at a medium pace and waited at the elevator with his hands in his pockets, searching.

The fourth floor seemed to be for intensive care. It was quiet, but not for a lack of people. Not to say that it was crowded, just hushed pockets of adults and bored children. The lights were down, too, as if the whole place were also asleep. Brandon slowed his pace appropriately and whispered the words again to the first person at the first desk on this floor. The woman leaned forward and pointed down the hall, nudging the air with her finger. He nodded and walked down the hallway, rounded a corner and froze when he saw people outside the next room. A man and a woman stood there holding each other, staring through the tiny window of the closed door. Brandon couldn't see what was inside, but he didn't move any closer to them. He took a step back when they saw him. The woman, small with a big soul seemed to fill the hallway with her tiny frame, all quickness and action while her husband was tall and skinny, like a tree that would sway even in a gentle breeze. The woman walked over to Brandon and slapped him in the face. She reared back again but her husband caught her arm with unforeseen quickness. The slap was loud, but everything else was quiet.

"You go," she screamed in her raspy whisper. "You don't belong here. My baby is in there cause o' you," and she moved against her husband's strength, and her words suddenly seemed equally restrained. Brandon rubbed his face in shock.

"I ain't him," he started, just as quietly.

"I know who you are," she retorted.

"I'm not my brother," he said, taking a step forward, jutting his chin out.

"I know who you are," she said again, relaxing against her husband.

“Son,” the husband spoke. The father spoke. “You better go.” Finality delivered in quiet bass. My brother looked frustrated and rejected and confused and angry, but he left. He spun a quiet circle and walked quickly back to the elevator. His hands were in his pockets until the door closed and then he lashed out at all the walls on the way down.

“I’m sorry, Margo,” he said to his throbbing hand. Thunder and screaming. The door opened to the ground floor and Brandon stood looking at three young men his age, his complexion. They were all four of them surprised. The one in the center, I knew his face. That face, wrapped around the backwards intent of a single moment, was the last thing I had seen before the thunder and screaming.

I remembered Margo Cooksey then. Pretty in more places than she was ugly, more nice than mean, with dreams and a scary father. We had been in love or something similar. Maybe it had been love because I had been with her while my brother had dated half a dozen different girls. We were going to go to college together. I guess I had had dreams, too. But I hadn’t know the boy now staring at my brother, and he had seemed to know me, which had made everything so confusing. The moment had been fleeting though. People had always said that we looked just alike. But we weren’t twins.

A moment after the surprise though, they had all swiveled back into their other guises. Brandon tried to move out of the elevator at the same time they were moving in. Their shoulders touched and they both exchanged looks and liquor scents.

“Watch where you walkin’,” Brandon said, his face scrunched up.

“You in *my* way,” was the response. They managed to scoot past one another and trade places and maintain eye contact. Brandon was determined not to move before the elevator doors closed. Determined to stare all of them down.

“I know it was you, Junior,” were the last words he passed through the narrowing slit. If he had been angry before, Brandon was fuming now. He reached into his pocket and gripped his hand around his keys. He walked out of the hospital to his car.

His friends sensed his agitation, but they didn't ask. Brandon got the car started on his first try this time but didn't immediately pull off.

"C, your cousin still got them guns, you was talking about?" he said into the steering wheel. C, who I took to be sitting in the passenger seat looked over at his friend calmly.

"Yeah," was all he said. The one in the back looked from one to the other.

"Will he let me hold some?" Brandon asked. C moved around in his seat, suddenly sober and reached into his deep pockets. He retrieved the slim device and palmed it, keeping half-closed eyes on Brandon. Brandon stared back, somewhat defiantly.

"Lemme call 'im,"

"What you need a gun for, Twin?" the one from the back asked. His eyes were afraid in the rear view mirror. I wasn't outside the car, or inside the car. I was dead. And angry, too, I realized in that frozen, echoing moment. I wouldn't be able to accomplish anything ever. I wasn't supposed to have died.

"Shut up," C said, phone to his ear. He slumped down in his seat and talked low. Brandon put the car in gear and drove out of the parking lot and away from the hospital. I wanted to stay and see why the boy named Junior was there, but I was compelled to leave.

C came through, and I decided that I liked the boy. I didn't know him, but I saw that he took care of Brandon and that was enough. He asked when he needed the weapons; Brandon responded as soon as possible. As soon as possible meant later that night and C needed to be dropped off to make sure of things. Brandon wasn't curious and he didn't ask, focused as he was. Brandon dropped his friend off and there in the front of the quiet house, the one in the back got into the front seat and stretched his legs as Brandon drove away. He asked where they were going for the fifth time that night.

"I'm taking you home, Abe," Brandon responded. The boy objected, but was overruled. It was important for Abe, bound as they were, for him to be apart of anything Brandon and C did. It was important for Brandon to be the brother. I wondered if I was his

model. Abe gave up before it came to blows, there on the curb, the Hyundai door hanging open. His eyes wanted to speak something other than defiance, something well-meaning, similar to Brandon's look of good-intentions. Neither said anything, and the closing door punctuated the end of the conversation.

Brandon called a number on his phone as he drove away staring into his rear view. He asked if he could come over, and then he didn't drive home. The place was a nice apartment complex, much like one I think that I would've aspired to live in. In the darkness I could make out little more than that it was a woman with consoling words. It never got any lighter around them than it was outside with the moon out and full. It was noisy though, and sudden and urgent. It was the first time I had realized that I was unnatural, to be silent witness to what they did. She gave and he took, and there towards the end he cried and she held him. Deeply. It was something that I had never experienced with Margo; we couldn't risk pregnancy. I found myself hoping he was crying for that, too. He admitted things that even I never knew, and he asked her if they could be more. She gave in to him as I had seen women give in before; they liked his charm and his smile and his swagger in ways that I could never duplicate despite our physical similarity. It had made me all the happier to have found Margo. After all the confessions though, they had sex again, and it was the same. He showered and left and hadn't kissed her once.

He was halfway back across town to C's when he called him on his phone. His face was confused momentarily and then he turned his car to point it in the direction of a different corner of the city. I liked to imagine that I was in the passenger seat, together with my brother. I remembered though, strangely, that we had never been that close in life.

I was the older, and suspected that our fathers were different despite our ages being only a year apart, but I never asked our mother before she died. We either had the same father, or we had different fathers and our mother was strong enough, inside and out, to instill in us a sense of sameness. That was how I liked to look at it,

but not the way it was. Brandon wanted to seem macho on his way to being the champion of where we lived, to do things for our mother and neighbors, to be a leader. I thought it was misguided, and I just wanted to leave, and I thought every day about how to escape. When I couldn't be physically gone, I would find something to take my mind elsewhere. We used to have arguments about who was paying more attention. We had a fistfight the day after our mother's funeral. He thought we could've done something for her; I thought she was doomed from the beginning, and I never told him that we were the cause. Brandon showed me he had learned to be hard, and he still had come to my funeral.

C made a very big deal over a few pistols. I knew that less militant people who went to the shooting range as casual hobby had more guns and were better shots with them than any group of street thugs, but Brandon seemed impressed. I was impressed that C knew where Junior slept, where his children's mother stayed. He had dark clothes, but no mask. I agreed that it was important they know who was shooting. I wanted Junior to see my face.

Brandon didn't have any apprehensions until they were in the van, him and C and several older men who did wear masks, and who didn't speak. And C didn't explain their existence or participation. Brandon saw the driver reach around the steering column and the road go dark, the van slow and C reach over to flip off his safety, to look evenly at Brandon with his own unmasked face.

"This for Twin," he said. Brandon nodded, but he still looked unsure. The driver whispered something, waving his hand at those in the rear. I followed their eyes to the house, to the man sleepily sliding his slippers to the curb, garbage can in tow. I looked in his dark face and saw that it wasn't Junior. It wasn't Junior. I was back in the van again, looking into Brandon's face, but he moved through me with the others through the sliding door into the street. One of the older men shot first and the rest followed, but the first was satisfactory to kill anybody. The rest were just thunderous noise. A door opened next door, a light went out across the street, dogs barked, people versed themselves on not remembering.

“Twin,” and the shout replied to itself with a loud pop. “Twin, you stupid nigga,” which was followed by more pops. The front tire of the van went flat, another missed wide, and a third struck C in the leg. He folded forward screaming. Other people came from the dark, open house, those in the street fired to meet them. Brandon looked down into C's pained face and did a full, frightened turn. Everyone was shooting. The noise the bullets made even when they missed was terrifying, and I suddenly had no want to be there, to see, but I could do nothing but see. Junior went from standing with his arms upraised on his tip toes, yelling at the top of his lungs, to laying flat on his back. A hole in his chest made his white t-shirt fade to red and then brown as he lay in his front yard staring up at the sky. I had never known barriers until that scene gripped me and held me fixed into seeing. There was nothing I wanted more than to leave. I looked down on my brother as he ducked around the rear of the van, looking for somewhere to run, people dying in his ears. This isn't what he wanted. I watched the brake light explode in red glass near his face. This isn't what I wanted. More thunder and screaming.

Brandon ran, down the sidewalk and away, hands jerking up to his head whenever he heard a sound. I watched him go, and escape. I lulled over every dying man, and stopped over Junior. I could feel the heat in his chest, the wet struggle, and cold shakes. I saw his eyes and he saw mine.

The world went from night to day, and I wasn't looking at red grass, but a white ceiling. Junior was still there though, mortified. The pain was mine however, and thankfully, the screaming and thunder were gone. Oddly, I was happy somewhat. His friends came into my view, the two from the elevator, tugging at him. Junior dropped the gun, staring down at me.

“This ain't Twin,” he whispered. It is only true that there isn't a cop around when you need one for the grand majority of the time. They were there then, and no one else had to die. Not Junior, not Brandon, not C.

I look over at Margo to see her still form. She's still breathing, not as worse off as me. I'll be dead before the paramedics arrive, but she ought to make it. She's strong, like her mother, and fierce, like her father. With dreams.

I think about my funeral, and everyone there who I don't know from a community I never liked and always wanted to leave. I fight now harder than ever against the voices telling me it's time to rest.

I don't want to rest; I want to live, I say.

And you did, they say.

