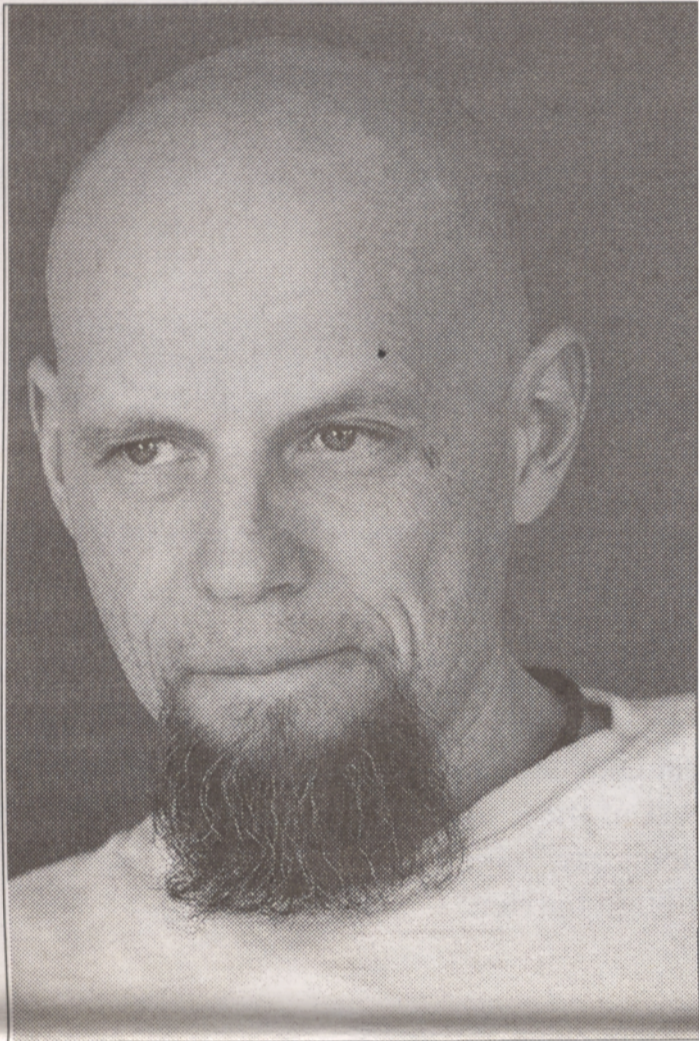


ABUSE, from page 1

children called City Light. Boise lay four hours from her hometown, Pocatello, a place she hadn't seen in months. But simply being in Idaho opened up a grab bag of emotions tied to two words: "meth" and "Skye."

The first tie happened by accident. She'd had too much to drink at a party, and, when she wasn't throwing up, she was close to passing out. Someone offered her a line of crystals and said, Here, do this, you'll feel better. Brandy snorted. "And it was one extreme to the next," she recalls. Her stomach settled, her mind cleared. So she kept drinking. She was 14.

From that point on, Brandy snorted and smoked meth whenever it came around, and the drug, easily "cooked" in neighborhood meth labs, turned up on a regular basis in rural Pocatello. But snorting and smoking got old, so she switched to needles, injecting



Richard Duncan

into veins in her arm. The off-white crystals made Brandy's teenage troubles seem to disappear. For a while, anyway. But meth, which stimulates production of a neurotransmitter called dopamine, ignites the brain's reward center. Rushes of euphoria and invincibility result, but they come with a cost: the likelihood of long-term addiction.

The second tie occurred when Brandy developed a delirious fever. Her mother rushed her to the hospital, where she underwent an examination. Brandy listened to the results. "I was pregnant." Eight months later, she gave birth to a daughter, Tyranny Skye. Brandy was 19.

A young mother, Brandy loved her child, caring for her the best she could. But meth, it haunted her with its siren song. As Brandy gave in to its addictive call, her mother and brother obtained joint custody of Skye. When Brandy tried to visit, her mother wouldn't have it. She left food on the porch, locked the door, drew the blinds. Humiliated, Brandy stopped visiting the house.

Her visits became impossible in early 2004, when she was arrested for burglary. Paroled six months later, Brandy entered a mandated treatment program and devised a remedy for sobriety: "I need clean, sober friends." Those friends eluded her. When she started shooting meth and drinking again, she broke parole. Thirty-eight more months in prison.

Back on the streets, estranged from Skye, high on meth, Brandy knew she needed help. Fast. A friend from prison, Morgan Price, had hightailed it to Seattle in August 2008 to kick meth and had remained clean. Maybe it would work for Brandy. Morgan bought her a bus ticket. But in the Emerald City, Brandy couldn't find her groove: After failing treatment programs and sleeping on the Seattle streets, Brandy hopped on an overnight bus bound for Boise.

Brandy consulted the map with the address to the shelter that sits three long

blocks from the bus station. She walked through the bus station's glass doors and into the cold Idaho night.

Even after years of meth, Brandy still carried an air of small-town wholesomeness. She had a plump, oval face. Deep brown eyes. Smooth lips. A cascade of auburn hair. She moved her full figure with a take-your-time gait, as though she didn't know the meaning of hurry.

City Light occupies a remodeled church. At the front desk, Brandy asked if the shelter had space. It did, a mat on the floor in a room filled with women and children. That night, she listened as women whispered, kids snored — the white noise of a place full of people with nowhere else to go. By 8 a.m., at last exit call, all the women and children were required to go somewhere. Brandy walked out into the Idaho morning.

Boise, the state's largest city, marks the eastern fringe of an enormous flood plain called Treasure Valley. To its northeast, snow-frosted mountains. Within its borders, stands of cottonwood, maple, sweet gum. And meandering through downtown, the Boise River.

Upon a square-mile grid of downtown streets, a small number of shelters and public spaces host Boise's homeless population. Nearly every day they trudge a circuit from drop-in center to library to shelter. Nearly every day, Brandy considered contacting Skye, but she knew her mother wouldn't allow it.

One afternoon, Brandy wandered into the library. Homeless people sat at tables, some asleep. That's when she noticed him: shaved head, blue eyes, beard, a few tattoos. Cute and sitting alone. She caught his eye. He looked back, then averted his gaze. Neither spoke. They went their separate ways.

A couple days later, Brandy stood outside a drop-in center with her cup of coffee. Homeless people huddled in the cold. Breath and steam merged. The guy from the library stood nearby. Sensing he was shy, Brandy went up to him.

Hi, Brandy said.

Hey, he said. His name was Richard, Richard Duncan, but sometimes he went by Auto. Their eyes locked.

Wanna go hang out tomorrow? Richard asked.

Sure, Brandy said.

The next morning, Brandy and Richard reconnected. Each brought along a friend, and, piling into Richard's buddy's old SUV, they went for a joy ride. They stopped for gas and stocked up on Joose, a caffeinated malt alcoholic beverage in a 23.5-oz. can, before they drove to the Boise foothills. All four tipped back cans as they gazed out over Treasure Valley. It was barely 9 a.m. Brandy had failed to find clean, sober friends.

Brandy talked with Richard. He made her laugh. She found him nice, sweet. Plus, they had things in common. He'd been released from prison in November, the month before. She'd been released in July. Richard had a teenage daughter in Boise, but he barely knew her. Brandy had a 6-year-old daughter in Pocatello. He told her people sometimes called him Auto because he stole cars.

As her mind absorbed information about Richard, her eyes drank in his appearance. He had a pair of small lightning bolts tattooed near his left eye. Across his upper fingers, displayed like a pair of brass knuckles, was a word: "SKINHEAD." Brandy's father was of Native descent, so the tattoo made her wonder. But once, two male friends who had done time in California told her that just because someone got tattoos while on the inside, it didn't mean he was a white supremacist outside. "I was just really thinking it was a prison thing," Brandy remembers.

Still, she asked him, It's not going to be a problem, me being part Native?

No, Richard said.

When his buddy left, Richard, Brandy and her friend bused back to town and bought beer. They sat near the greenbelt, the area hugging the northern banks of the Boise River. There, Brandy kissed Richard for the first time.

If you wanna back out of this, he said, that's fine.

Brandy thought it a strange thing for Richard to say. Back out? Of what? She didn't know what he meant, so she told him, No, I'm sticking with it.

As Brandy's friend visited a job center, Brandy and Richard tagged along. The pair sneaked into a bathroom together. They kissed again. Passions rose. Clothes came off.

It's a vulnerable moment, undressing in front of someone the first time, the body revealing its secrets. When Richard removed his shirt, Brandy saw more tattoos on his arms and neck. Then she saw the two on his chest.

Covering most of his left pec, in blue-green ink, was an enormous swastika. On his right pec sat a likeness of — Adolf Hitler? "I was just like, 'Wow,'" Brandy remembers, stunned by the imagery. Northern Idaho had a reputation for white supremacy, but Brandy had grown up in the southeast. She had little experience with it. The story the two guys told about tattoos came back to her: probably just a prison thing.

Brandy, drunk in a bathroom in Boise, fumbled to remove her clothes. True, she felt a little uncomfortable about the tattoos. But by that point, she and Richard had hit the ground running, and she didn't think there was any reason to stop.

The illustrated man

Richard might never have hit upon those tattoos as an adult if he hadn't learned of Odin as a child.

Richard grew up in Salinas, Calif., the son of a Vietnam vet and a home day care provider. As a kid, he entertained himself with, among other pursuits, the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons. Diehards call it D&D. The game allows each player to embody a mythical being: dragon, wizard, giant, troll or even a dungeon master.

Players gain a deeper understanding of D&D through reference books, and one book described the pantheons of numerous mythologies. Drawn to the text, Richard became enthralled with the gods who lived in the Norse mythos: the father god Odin, the trickster god Loki, the warrior god Thor. That mythology had inspired author J.R.R. Tolkien as well, leading to his "The Lord of the Rings" series, books Richard stole from the library — and loved.

The fantastical realm of childhood suffered a dose of reality when Richard's father split. His relationship with his mother disintegrated, and when she kicked him out, he became a ward of the state, bouncing between group homes and juvenile detention centers. He longed for the stable family he felt he never had.

In a group home one day, Richard read a sign: Witchcraft is not a state-recognized religion. "Of course they said we can't have it," recalls Richard, "so I got into it." He discovered Wicca, a Neo-Pagan religion that blends respect for nature, herbal magic and benevolent witchcraft. He loved it. Together, Norse mythology and Wicca shaped his spiritual beliefs.

The restrictions he experienced in juvenile homes created a longing for freedom, which accompanied a frustrated desire for family connection. As an adult, he moved to Sacramento, to be near his mother. She didn't want to see him. Richard hung out at friends' places sometimes, slept on the streets other times, developing, over the course of a year, a bad heroin habit. His mother relocated near Reno, Nevada, and again seeking connection, he followed. He lived outside the Biggest Little City in the World, where he dropped his heroin habit and fell big time into meth. On a search for important family papers at his mother's place, he stole his stepdad's safe and found, instead, money. Once Richard had pocketed the cash, he tried to return the safe, but it was too late. He was arrested. On his 22nd birthday. Grand larceny. Five years.

In prison, life fragmented along racial lines. White this side, black that side, Latino over here, Native over there. Within these groups, more fissures emerged. Richard

noticed that among white inmates, there were long-haired druggies, sometime druggies and we're-not-druggies, and the last group, with their full beards, resembled modern-day Vikings. He gravitated toward the druggies, but as he met more neo-Vikings, he felt pulled in their direction. He discovered the group not only stayed clean, but they clung to a unique belief: They practiced Odinism.

Odinism follows spiritual principles spelled out by the Norse god Odin. His words form the body of an epic poem dating from the ninth or 10th century called "The Hávamál" or, in English, "Sayings of the High One." The poem offers a folksy blend of divine prescriptions that touch upon topics ranging from self-respect to ethical conduct. Richard admired its principles. "If I could ever adhere to them like I'm supposed to," he recalls, "I'd never get in trouble."

Unlike most Odinists on the outside, those practicing Odinism within Nevada's prison system were a gang whose members also clung to another belief: white supremacy. They called themselves the Aryan Warriors. For them, Odinism and white supremacy went hand-in-hand — and all over the body as well. The prison tattoos that decorated their skins blended pagan symbolism with Aryanism. Not that Richard's first tattoo evoked either. On his right hand, between thumb and forefinger, someone inked a heart. Years later, he covered it with an iron cross, a German military honor.

Released from prison in 1999 and away from his Odinist brothers, Richard couldn't make the principles of "The Hávamál" stick. He guzzled beer and malt beverages and ping-ponged between heroin and meth, addictions that opened the gates to multiple, lengthy prison terms. Eight months for carrying a concealed weapon; 24 months for possession of a stolen vehicle; 24 months for attempted battery causing substantial bodily harm; 22 months for assault with a deadly weapon.

Richard shaved his head in prison. The more time he served, the more tattoos he acquired: the words "Ladies Love Outlaws" on the nape of his neck; a D&D dragon on his left shoulder; the term "PURE BLOOD" on his left forearm; near his left eye, "SS," the insignia for Hitler's elite defense corps. Others tattoos decorated his neck, his arms and his legs.

By the time he left the Nevada Correctional Center in Reno in November 2008 and boarded a Greyhound to Boise, his skin had become a living canvas. A pastiche of illustrations that touched upon paganism, white supremacy, pop culture and prison life, Richard's flesh told his life story in cerulean ink.

The illustrations also evoked an important concept to him: family. Through Odinism he'd learned that a man was a provider. In this regard, he'd failed. His teenage daughter's name once adorned his left pec, but the tattoo artist had screwed up the lettering. So Richard covered it up with an enormous swastika. And like that messed-up script, he'd messed up with his daughter: He'd been in jail at her birth. If he ever started another family, he'd do better and be there at his child's birth.

In Boise, Richard, 35, decided to provide for Brandy. True, they didn't have a family together. Not yet. But no matter what Brandy needed — shelter, food, cigarettes, money — he'd provide. He'd protect her. That's one rule he swore he'd never break.

The lady and the outlaw

Shortly after their bathroom encounter, Richard suggested he and Brandy always follow a rule: stay together. His Odinist principles told him a man must keep his family safe, so he left the men's shelter to ensure Brandy wouldn't be alone. It touched her. "He wanted to protect me," she says. They just needed a place to stay.

They heard about a guy with an unheated house who let people crash for free. To make