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Making an Impression

The boys at Evil Wind, a tattoo parlor on Rantoul Street, ignored me as I perused the racks of designs, but listened to them, as I admired the designs that ranged from butterflies to skulls. Evidently one of the boys was there for his first tattoo and brought his buddies for moral support. These were nice, normal looking kids, who later told me they were students at Merrimack College.

The tattoos I remember from my childhood usually had a rose or an anchor in them, or sometimes I would sneak a peek at a pinup on an occasional forearm, or the numbers that were branded above the wrist of a holocaust survivor I knew. Whatever it was, I never aspired to having one. But in the 90's I began seeing tattoos everywhere. They appeared on both sexes and were sometimes so extravagantly rendered, that their human canvas was almost like a kinetic comic book, and I was fascinated.

Still, fascination however is not what I experienced when each of my lovely children came home from college, freshly branded with their own designs. These were not your generic tattoos that you pick off the wall in a tattoo parlor. Oh no. My children are much too picky for that. No, these were their own artistic designs mind you, although as I pointed out, I would have been more than happy to supply the canvases or paper for their self-expression.

Recently my son's original tattoo (which consists of three Chinese symbols; life, longevity, and drums over a bare tree), has become integrated into a wide colorful bracelet on his upper arm that includes a poi fish on each side of the original design. He didn't warn me, relishing my reaction when I visited him in Pearl Harbor last January; Oh for joy, another way to shock his mother! Evidently he'd been stuck in Guam for a week (he's in the Navy) and was bored, but my response more than made up for any pain he'd withstood. I'd long recovered from his sister's tattoo, a "tribal" sun, discretely placed on her lower back, and by comparison, his was a walking billboard.

"Why would you do such a thing?" I asked.

"You just don't understand," he replied and insisted that there is a particular kind of bonding between people with tattoos, but I can't say that I would think it any stranger if he joined a clan and started wearing a kilt. A tattooed waitress at Chianti confirmed this bonding thing and further explained that there are definite class distinctions and the kind of tattoo you have can identify you with your peer group. It's gen-ex *branding*!

As you know by now, I am a yoga student, and a lot of yoga instructors have tattoos, something I find surprising. Yoga is related to Zen simplicity and purity, which to my thinking, conflicts with the surprise of an ankle encircled with a tattooed bracelet of leaves, or a flower, but as I already told you, I am not enlightened.

Young women have begun getting tattoos on their lower backs, and they look mighty racy popping out of low-slung jeans that don't meet tiny tank tops. I would like to check in with these women in twenty years when some of the tattoos have swollen with twenty pounds, and see what they think. But Corey Shea, a tattoo artist at Evil

Wind, informed me that women of all ages are now getting tattoos, and last week he emblazoned a Tinkerbell on the shoulder of a fifty year old woman on her birthday. He said he recently tattooed a seventy year old woman. Most women get them on their lower backs, their hips, shoulders, or ankles he said.

One of the boys waiting in the shop, proudly rolled up his sleeve to show me his bicep which bore the design he had created in art class at St. John's prep. Corey, the tattoo artist, is only eighteen as well and told me that he started doing designs in his high school art class. As an ex-art teacher myself, I wonder how many tattoo artists I inspired. Cory also explained that although he is very young, he has apprenticed with a licensed tattoo artist, has studied the pre-requisite anatomy and physiology classes, and became certified in CPR.

Tattooing has become way bigger than something guys do when they get drunk. It's a mainstream trend, and based on Corey's arms, it is the way that youth is telling the world who they are. Still, I have no desire to see more tattoos on my children, and have told my son that if he gets another one, I shall get one too, but in a place that would embarrass him, like my nose. I did pick out a cute little rose at Evil Wind, just in case.