

Indigo

Wednesday night last week I sent Randi home early, so I was alone when the guy came in. There's a gadget on the door that plays the first few bars of "Born To Be Wild" when the door opens, to let you know somebody's there. It's unnecessary. The place isn't that big, and even if somebody did sneak in, there's nothing to steal. What I sell is my skill. Maybe even simpler than that, what the customers pay for is a kind of courage. I've been to the trade shows where every jailhouse scratcher calls himself a skin artist and makes out like he's swirling up Winslow Homers on sorority girl ankles, but that's all bullshit. The real difference between me and the kid in every shop class who sketches heavy metal album covers onto his notebook is that I, for a price, will carve it on you. Permanently. Most guys just don't have the sand. I do, and that's what the people pay for.

The guy I was looking at was not one of my typical customers. Most people come in groups. They are nervous or drunk and sometimes they videotape each other. This guy was alone. He was maybe forty, and he was in a suit. A charcoal three-button. It looked custom. I sold suits at a Nordstrom's in Los Angeles for seventeen months while I was going to school. I quit both institutions in the same week. School left no trace, but at ten paces I can still tell a bespoke suit from the Brooks Brothers jobs that you see hanging like garage doors from the real estate pushers and marketing consultants in the business class lounge at Sky Harbor.

He glanced around, and when he spotted the chair he walked to it without picking up any of the sample books or looking at the designs that hang on the walls. He straddled the chair and flopped backwards into it. It was still partially reclined from the Chinese character job Randi had finished before I cut her loose for the day. One set of Randi's grandparents fled something nasty in the Ukraine sixty or seventy years ago, and the other set were Mexicans, but she has developed a specialty in Asian language tattoos. She says she's writing "power of good fortune" or "watchfulness" and other not-quite-translatable Asian sounding ideas. Could be.

"Evening," I said to the man. "Something I can do for you?"

"Why yes," he said, brightly. "Yes, there is. It's why I came in here, in fact." He spoke without looking at me. He was staring at the ceiling. I looked up at it, too. Nothing.

I got up from behind the register and came around to the chair. I bought that chair from the old dentist whose office used to be four doors down in the same strip mall. He retired and sold everything about a year after I opened. The old dentist's face was pre-sunblock. It wore every long weekend he had spent in the shrieking Arizona sun on a Lake Powell houseboat with a drink in his hand. The flesh hung from his skull like a wet towel on the back of a chair, and you could see the seam where the cartilage in his nose met the bone. When we spoke his manner was courteous and slightly formal, but he did nothing to hide his old man's fear of the future. My place was busier than his, and the idea that more people wanted me to ink them up than wanted him to clean their teeth didn't do anything good for him. The world became more incomprehensible to him every time a freshly minted thirty-something divorcee trotted past his door with her giggling girlfriends on her way to my place for a cathartic ring of barbed wire around her bicep. It has crossed my mind that maybe I drove him out.

I reupholstered the chair myself with a real appaloosa horsehide I bought at a swap meet in Tempe. Cost a fortune. When I got it done it looked a bit like the old dentist.

The guy found the control box and reclined the chair. When it eased back his feet came off the floor and I could see that his shoes had been shined recently, by someone who did that for a living. I picked up one of the sample books and sat at the stool next to him.

Pretty girls with nice bodies want something near their underwear. Usually some symbol from a religion or a culture not their own—Kokopelli on a Lutheran, reclining Buddhas on Methodists, that sort of thing. Boys want weapons or animals. People who can't speak English want the name of a dead relative, often a child. This guy, it was hard to say. I flipped to the section with sketches of historical figures. I once put Erwin Rommel on a guy's shoulder. That guy was wearing a suit, too.

"You have a design in mind? Know where you want it?" I started to hand him the book. He waved it off, and pulled a piece of folded up tissue paper out of the ticket pocket on his suit. He held it in the palm of one hand while he gently unfolded the paper with the other. Belly-up in the paper was a dead cockroach. It was intact, like it had died of natural causes, as opposed to being stomped on and ground into the pavement. He set it gently on the instrument tray attached to the chair.

"I want this. On my face. Belly side up." He held his hands up to his face with his fingers spread, as if imitating whiskers. Then he almost shouted, "Mandibles and mouth parts on my forehead, legs spread across my cheeks, and the end of it on my chin. Just like it looks here." His suit had working cuff buttons. They were undone. That takes a real tailor and costs plenty.

I looked down at the bug. "You having a bad day, or what?"

He sighed and for the first time looked at me directly. "How long is this going to take?" he asked. "Not the tattoo itself—the process of me assuring you that it is indeed what I want, convincing you to do your job, dispensing with any instinct you may have for counseling me. All that shit. How long?"

The stool is on wheels so that I can roll around the customer on big jobs. Highway Maps, class photos, it's amazing the shit people want on their bodies. I backed away from the guy a little and tried to get a sense of him, something to tell me where to go with his request.

"Look," I said, "You should go home and sleep on this. You put that on yourself," I nodded at the cockroach, "on your face, your world is never going to be the same. Know that." I've done four facial tattoos. I remember all of them. The last one was three tear drops down a man's cheek. They were tiny indigo drops noticeable only at conversational distance. Later, that guy lit a homeless woman on fire. If you have ink on your face, it's so the rest of us can tell that you have been consumed by something—some person or substance, or just some garden variety bad idea. A person doesn't do that to themselves if they think regular thoughts about television or their dog or the fortunes of the local sports franchise. They do that if some bad seed got in there and took root and sprouted and is never ever going away. I knew this.

He exhaled. "I'm sure you can tell by the sound of my voice that I'm not drunk and I'm not crazy. This is what I want. I can pay you well for your time." He looked back at me. "I know that it won't come off, and I don't need to be saved from myself. I

happen to believe that irrevocable decisions are good for the soul. Yours is not the only tattoo shop in Phoenix. I can go somewhere else. You have a reputation for solid work, and I would prefer to engage you. Do we have a deal?"

As a rule, I don't ask my customers a lot of questions. I don't require that you be sober, and I don't second-guess what you want on your hide. Maybe I wouldn't do it to myself, but I don't wear your skin and I don't make it my business to call your shots. If you want to surprise your boyfriend with his name tattooed across your cleavage when he gets out of Maricopa County Correctional—show me your money and hop in the chair, sister. I'm an adult and I demand the right to live with my decisions—good, bad, and indifferent. I expect everyone else, including my customers, to do the same. I often repeat that, or some version of it, to myself and to Randi, and, from time to time, to the mothers of inked up college kids suffering from hangovers and regret.

"A job like that, I'm not taking plastic. Gotta be cash. Up front."

He smiled. He was a handsome man. "Well then, now we're talking. How about dollars? You take American dollars?" He pulled a wad out of his pocket and counted off twelve hundred dollar bills and held them out to me. "I think that's considerably more than your usual rate. I expect it to relieve you of any lingering reluctance. Let's get the show on the road. My new life awaits." I didn't take the bills right away.

"Maybe you want pesos? Drachmas? Fucking guilders? I can work with that, too. Or maybe you can just grow a fucking pair and do what I ask you to do."

I thought about getting physical with the guy. Maybe tossing him out. I didn't. I let what he said roll off, which is something I practice. I'm clean and sober four years seven months and change. The price I paid to be walking around here among the living, well, it was no bargain. I'd like to think the great battle for my soul has been fought and won, and I'm here collecting my peace dividend in this Phoenix strip mall. I try not to let anybody or anything rattle me. My clientele, they don't always make that easy.

I mixed it up with a skinny biker about eight months ago. He was screaming at Randi when I came in with a bag of tacos I had picked up for lunch. He didn't like the tiger Randi had just put on his girlfriend. The girlfriend had asked Randi to put on a roaring Bengal tiger she'd found in one of the sample books. The pattern was eighteen inches high. She talked Randi into shrinking it down to four inches to fit on the top of her left breast. At eighteen inches the tiger was an arresting sight, even in the hands of a no talent scratcher. Randi has talent to spare, but no experience, which would have told her not to shrink animal designs like that. At four inches the majesty was gone and the tiger was an angry gerbil, permanently howling at the world from this lady's sagging titty, which is how it happened that she and her boyfriend were screaming at Randi when I came back with the tacos. After a little diplomacy the biker was going quietly, but his girlfriend decided at the last minute that she wasn't. She grabbed Randi's hair, I grabbed her, and the biker grabbed a pencil from the pencil caddy on the counter next to the register. I watched him pause to select it. He pulled it out, looked at the point, and then he stuck it into my left bicep and snapped it off. Then they left quietly and Randi drove me to the emergency room.

The next day I cut a two foot length of garden hose and filled it with sand. I plugged the ends and wrapped it in black electrical tape. It's in a drawer behind the counter, under the owner's manual for the microwave. I haven't touched it since I put it in there, but it calms me, just knowing.

Instead of throwing the guy out, I started freehanding an outline with markers. For standard stuff there are commercial patterns that you transfer to the skin and then trace with the gun. You get the patterns to stick on by rubbing them with deodorant. The patterns are in the sample books. It's not like anybody can do it, but it's not the height of the profession. Freehanding original work is much more difficult, but as it happens, I'm very good. My specialty is tribal symbols: Gaelic, Native American, and Pacific Islander. I'd like to think that if Queequeg rolled into Phoenix and needed some ink, I'm the man he'd come to see.

I looked at the roach with a magnifying glass and thought for a moment about breathing some malice into it. I nudged it with a pen, but there was no malice there whatsoever. It was stone dead and utterly indifferent. When you try to gin up fury or evil or whatever, you run the risk of ending up with work that looks like something you'd see painted on a tilt-a-whirl. A shark, done well, doesn't need to be snarling. I decided to do the roach straight.

The freehand took over an hour, during which the man said nothing. He may have been sleeping. My usual closing time came and went. When I started with the gun he winced, but after that he made no sound at all. There was a substantial amount of blood and I had to pause periodically to wipe it off with a towel so that I could see what I was doing. I wear latex gloves, but the blood got on my wrists and the cuffs of my shirt and my pant leg. I did most of the work with my face within an inch or two of his. Close enough so that my nose was full of the coppery smell of his blood.

The underside of the roach was a tricky straw color, and the seams where the plates of the abdomen met were darker. The knuckles, or whatever they are, were difficult. So were the tiny barbs on the legs. For hours the guy didn't move and didn't say anything, and I focused. This is my life's work, such as it is, and I take some pride in it. When I dragged the gun across the spot just above the bridge of his nose he opened his eyes. They banged around crazily for a second or two before he clamped them shut again.

When I finished it was after midnight. I gave him a clean towel and he wiped the blood from his face, and then he looked at me. If you drove past him in a car headed the other way you would see it and it would bother you. Under all that he was wild smiling, and I could see his teeth, and I knew then I shouldn't have done it. I am without religion, but I think I know what a sin looks like.

I went to the office to get him a tube of Bacitracin and heard the chime from the door. When I came back there was a girl standing there, maybe thirteen, maybe fifteen. It's hard for me to tell. I don't spend time around children. I don't know where she came from. The guy looked at her. "Karen," he said. She didn't say anything to either of us at first. Then she shrieked and the noise was like something you would hear on a construction site. Then she said, "Wash it off, just wash it off." The guy got up and started walking for the door, and she went with him, hanging on his sleeve. They didn't say a word to me.

I haven't heard from them. No lawyers, no phone calls, nothing. I put the guy's money in the safe, and if it wasn't there in a little wad with a rubber band around it, I'd maybe convince myself that I imagined the guy. But the money is there, and that man, he walks the earth someplace, and I did that to him.

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