

Dream Your Ink

I suspect to distract me from his needle, the anesthesiologist prepping me for cataract surgery mentions my tattoo. I wonder if he has one hidden beneath his scrubs. “There’s always a story,” he says, as if he might like to hear mine.

“For my sister. Merri.” I rub my hand across my tattooed wrist like Aladdin his lamp, but alas, no sparkling purple smoke and no giant Genie appear. Unnecessary. The intricate image possesses a quiet magic that enchants my life through memories.

I close my eyes to see: *Our blue popsicle lips, red fireball tongues. Merri and me, hula hoops whirling. Holding our breath underwater in a backyard swimming pool. Playing beyond baby dolls with real-live daughters. Merri and me, tackling multiple sclerosis (MS)—twice.*

On a sunny September day in 2013, my niece, Autumn, and I pull into Crossbones Tattoos off Fort Myers Beach, a small studio sandwiched between Tina’s Bar and a Bait Shop in a strip mall anchored by Goodwill. The “Dream Your Ink,” sign painted in swirling pastel letters on the window affirms what we’ve been doing for months—seeking symbols we could live with permanently.

Inside, demonic skulls, coiled serpents, empty-eyed zombies, and fire-breathing dragons glare at us from the walls, threaten to leap onto our skin. Not exactly what we have in mind.

A short, muscular man with shaven head approached us. “Hi, I’m Steel.”

Autumn’s eyes widen. A die-hard Steelers fan, she takes his name as a sign. “Okay then. You’re meant to be our artist.”

We tell him the connection and learn that his nickname originated with childhood friends. “Yeah, they thought they could mess with me. A serious miscalculation. You know—due to my size. Don’t get me wrong. I’m no bully.” His smile reads shy. “I’m really kind of a teddy bear.”

I start helping Autumn explain her ink dream. Oh dear, maybe interrupted her. Steel’s smile slides into a scowl. “Please. Don’t say anymore. Her body, her choice.”

My cheeks a-blush, I slink away to check Steel’s restroom. According to the Google-god that’s how to check out the cleanliness of a tattoo studio. I found a slightly stained sink, soap, paper towels, and the toilet flushed. I’d seen far worse.

I defended myself to my reflection in the mirror. *You weren’t trying to control Autumn’s decision, only offer guidance. You started young, after all—being expected to substitute for your mother with your younger sister, and father too. They asked you questions and wanted your opinion on what lay beyond you to know. All because the plaque scars in your mother’s brain and spine caused her nervous system to go haywire, short circuit, spark, and burn out.*

Autumn flew to Florida at my invitation to celebrate what would have been her mom’s 60th birthday by getting tattoos. My idea surprised people who knew me. Fair enough. I had often judged tattoos to be a passing fancy, a senseless fad, and worse, an act of violence committed against the body. Absurd, but I still associated tattoos with drunken sailors and peg leg pirates who flaunted vile images of naked women on their chests.

My daughter, Amber, had shocked me by getting a tattoo at 19, as I shocked my husband when I revealed my plan to do the same at 64. Back then, I’d convinced myself tattoos ruined any chances of landing an impressive job. Let’s just say, that didn’t happen.

Her decision did stoke my curiosity though and led me to consult on the matter with the college students I taught. They argued tattoos reflected a person’s identity. Symbols inked into

skin represented words to-live-by and recognized lost loved ones. Tattoos were not destruction, rather preservation. Not mutilation, rather art, created on a living canvas.

I reconstructed the significance of Amber's tattoo—the crown on her ankle, representation of her surname, King. In her ink dream, she challenged the confinement of the position to males, reveled in her sense of worth, and established the intention to reign over her life. Times had changed and I wanted to change with them—be a person capable of evolving.

When Autumn expressed the same fears, I had experienced but had never voiced, I saw the opportunity to act on my new awareness. “What if I forget my mother's face?” she said. “Will I feel guilty for not thinking about her enough forever?”

She was 17 when her mother died. I was 18 when my mother died, 45 when we lost Merri—both from MS. My niece needed more than old photographs and family lore. She needed her mother's spirit to exist in her body, her mother's traits to run through her blood. And so did I.

Autumn goes first to show me the pain is bearable. Steel tattoos “MBS”—her mother's initials in black and red (Merri's favorite colors) on the underside of Autumn's left wrist. He calls her desire to place them facing her “upside down,” but she likes having a secret only she and her mom share.

“What do you have in mind?” Steel wanders over to the counter where I thumb through a *Floral Tattoos* album. “You don't need that. I'll design something for you.”

Last time I saw Merri, she lay on white satin billows in an ebony box as finely lacquered as a Chinese chest. I could see my drawn face, my vacant eyes in its sheen. After Dad died, Merri called us “orphans.” I rejected the label. With Merri in the world, I felt neither abandoned, nor stranded. “We're the Burghardt Girls—we'll sister-parent each other like always.”

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Who was I now?

We surrounded Merri with roses. Only roses. Only red. Her favorite—perhaps because they symbolized love, romance, elegance, and expense. Perhaps because of the two red rose bushes in our back yard. Had she remembered our planting radishes in front of them? The fragrance of roses and fresh overturned dirt? The taste of dirt on our lips, so eager were we to eat the treat? Maybe Dad’s habit rubbed off on her. For as long as those roses bloomed, he picked one for the pink hobnail vase he set beside Mum.

Instead of red roses, I choose a sophisticated pink I call “rose.” Rose, my color, after my flower girl debut in fourth grade. Mum sewed me a rose velvet dress with satin cuffs, collar, and cummerbund. “More flattering than red for blondes,” she said. “More surprising for a December wedding.”

My turn to lie back in the black leather recliner. Extend my right arm. Steel sits close, masked, his whirring tattoo gun loaded with a tiny needle. I close my eyes and imagine each prick as a dot on a map leading to Merri. Each prick a portal to our past, our secret world of sisters. Some pricks register sharper in my skin than others, though none so sharp as the grief that stabbed me upon her death.

Steel tattoos a rose blossom for Merri and two buds for my parents. He tips the larger rose-colored petals in red, sensitive to my ink dream of representing both Burghardt girls. Tiny

leaves sprout from a spiraling stem that ends in a curlicue—like the path we walked to Anthony’s Beach on summer vacation, the grapevines we rode through the woods, our deserted jump rope.

Autumn and I agree, since dreaming our ink almost a decade ago, the ache of missing Merri lessened immediately, and has lasted. Sure, time helps heal, but I feel the magic released in a rub to my wrist—Merri’s spirit radiates from deep within me to the place my love for her has been etched into my skin. She comes to me face beaming, her hands overflowing with stories—stories that float straight from heaven to our rose and radish patch.