

INKED

By Rodney Rex

The fog on the bathroom mirror distorts my image. Drying off, I picture my young, strong, virile version staring back. I flex; let the gun show begin! My biceps bounce as I run a gauntlet of bodybuilding poses. Front double bicep . . . Boom! Side chest . . . Bam! Finally, the classic archer . . . Badda Boom Badda Bing, I still got it! The fog dissipates and, with it, my delusion. Time has made a mockery of my physique. My guns have become pea-shooters, and my tight abs are now punchlines in gravity's sick sense of humor. Old School is what the kids call me. Does time also mock my body ink? Throughout my life, I have accumulated over fifteen tattoos, and it appears that their colors are fading alongside my relevance. The responsible adults of my youth warned me about the trauma tattoos would leave over time. "Your skin will sag," some said, "no one will hire you," others said, "you will regret them," they all said. The results are in. Were they right? Do I regret getting inked?

I put on my favorite pair of Speedos, my only pair, checking to see if they still

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bring excitement. They are keepsakes from high school, like a prom dress or a favorite baseball card. Don't judge. I stand in front of the mirror, a model of nostalgia. My tattoos don't sag, but aging has affected their appearance. My shoulder yields my favorite piece: two intertwined alien bodies, centered in the remnants of a once blazing sun, craving each other's eternal company. A homage to the true romantic love I hoped to find. Its original colors are still vivid in my mind's eye. Brilliant greens, yellows, and reds characterized the younger version of my arm and gave it attitude, but the clock has stripped it of vibrancy. My tattoos have devolved from masterpieces at the Louvre to bathroom graffiti at a gas station. But do I care anymore? Does anyone?

I remember my first tattoo-related encounter. I was eighteen and returning from a long weekend at the Beale Street Music Festival in Memphis. My father picked me up from a friend's house with my excitable little brother bouncing in the backseat of their '92 Cavalier. An artist at the festival painted a henna tattoo on my forearm, a dragon, and perfect bait. Mom's tolerance for skin art would be tested after little bro ratted me out, which was inevitable. I imagine his squeaky, prepubescent voice telling on me, "Mooooom, Jr got a tattOOO!" She saw tattoos as the work of the devil, and her phone call post-betrayal confirmed her stance. It went as I knew it would, a lengthy tongue-lashing followed by an abrupt dial tone. I did not get to speak. My first trip to



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a parlor came shortly after the call.

I went alone, waiting till after dark because getting a tattoo during the day was lame. The shop I chose resided in a broken-windows neighborhood. It had a reputation for good work, not that it mattered. My mind was set. I was determined to join the ranks of the disenfranchised and embrace my teen angst. A tattoo seemed like the perfect addition to my rebellious lifestyle. Like an initiation into something bigger, something I never had—a sense of belonging.

Growing up in a military family caused detachment. Anything I regarded with sentiment was taken from me. I still miss my puppy. People, places, and things were fleeting, best to stop caring. I lived on two continents, five states, ten towns, and attended seven different schools before my eighteenth birthday. As a young man, I was empty. I owned nothing, loved no one. A tattoo was permanent, something I could hold on to. That night I would get my own identity, and nobody was going to take it away.

The parking lot was empty when I arrived. The streetlights were cracked, and iron bars protected the parlor windows from intruders. I would later ask my artist what someone would steal from the shop. "Drugs," he would answer. I wouldn't ask anymore questions. I walked in with my chest forward and my shoulders back. Boys didn't walk into tattoo parlors, men did. The inside was





brighter and cleaner than I thought it would be. I expected darkness and chaos, black cats and criminals, but it looked more like an art museum than a jail. Hundreds of pattern sheets covered the walls. Dozens of tattoo photo books were stacked on top of smoked-glass counters (hiding paraphernalia that only us tattoo guys knew about). I perused the available designs for ideas, having no clue what to get or where to put it. I inspected each image as I would words in a novel; they all mattered. Tribal bands, howling wolves, skulls, and breasts—so many

bare-bosomed women with horns and tails. There were guns and Harleys and gunned Harleys with their succubi riders. I chose a dog. It was my first tattoo; what can I say?

After an hour of being tortured by an ink-filled needle, I left the shop and drove home, reveling in the company of my new companion—a pit bull just above my right ankle bone. A void had been filled; I was no longer alone in the world. My truck felt different; it was less of a Dodge and more of a RAM. I turned the stereo's volume up, the bass thumping while NWA warned me about corrupt police. I dreamt of Compton. My head bobbed, and my Sox cap sat atop my fade, sideways. My elbow rested on the windowless door, allowing the night air to fill my vehicle with electricity. My eyes scoured the streets for signs of action, or trouble. What are you looking at? You got a problem? I was somebody. Born again. Invincible. Inked.

For years after, "That would be a cool tat," was my mantra. Comic book characters, mythological creatures, and insightful words all had the potential to romance my skin, to make it sexy. I loved decorating my body, but responsibility was in the near future, and tattoos were a big no-no in the workplace. Head, neck, and forearm tattoos were only for the unemployed, hardcore anarchists, or convicts. I kept mine behind clothed doors, most of them, out of respect for my future. My secrets



loomed large, however, and the feeling of being discovered by corporate eyes was ever-present. Are my sleeves long enough? Is my collar high enough? I was an antihero whose true identity hidden from an amalgamated nemesis. Respectable employers commonly held a "no visible ink" policy and even though society's acceptance of skin art has progressed, those policies are still inked in handbooks. Oh, the irony—now that would be a cool tat!

The ritual of acquiring skin art became all too familiar. The richness of a parlor's environment, the buzzing of a needle, and the scent of blood and bacitracin on newly minted ink is unforgettable. The artists, conversations, and shops all remain integral parts of my psyche. At a parlor in Las Vegas, Nevada, adult film star Jenna Jameson's best friend inked my right shoulder. He shared amazing stories that began with "I once saved her from . . ." My shin was the first piece for an artist in Levy, Arkansas. He went over it twice, and his heavy-handed stroke exposed his inexperienced hands. Ten thousand years from now, archaeologists will wonder why there's a num-

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ber thirteen drilled into my excavated tibia. From the Sunset Strip of LA to a dive shop in Huber Heights, Ohio, the sentimental value of my work goes deeper than my skin, much deeper.

Life is different since my first tattoo. The passing of time has wrought new attitudes, priorities, and physical changes. Entering that first parlor was a beginning step toward self-discovery; now, my journey's end brings ample time for reflection. My tattoos serve as a memoir, and like the wounds of an old lion, each has their own story. They are a photograph book, a diary, an indestructible flash drive. Others may find their current condition repulsive, but to me they are the same exquisite works of art that leapt from needle to flesh during each session.

I lean over the bathroom sink, inspecting my artwork. I run my fingers over the sun's outline on my shoulder; it resonates joyfully. I smile. I trace the two alien lovers, the tired yet pressing souls. My pupils dilate at their resilience. My hand covers the ink, not with regret, but with pride. A salute to the artist who created such a fine chapter in my book of life. Looking into the fogless mirror, I like what I see—a decorated man of character with stories to tell. I understand now. The questions were never about getting inked but about how I wanted to live my life. My adventure has been a lush landscape full of color and exuberance, and my skin will tell you all about it when I'm gone.

