

Jesus Had a Tat

by Steven Gowin

"Well what about indigenous cultures, is it ok for them?" she'd asked.

I'd barely started my coffee and the sun was already searing my brain. She'd remarked their beauty, admired those who wore them, argued that tattoos took guts.

She didn't want one though. That's not what she was after; what she wanted was a little fight. So I said, "Like Queequeg. We all move to Kokovoko." And she set her mouth tight and tilted her head.

I try to be open minded; I have lots of friends with lots of ink, but when I see an arm all marked up with those cotton candy tattooie colors, and cheap art, I don't know, truth told, it kind of turns my stomach a little.

"You look like trash all marked up like that," is what Dub Taylor said to CJ Moss in *Bonnie and Clyde*. Dub had a point. You let a guy paint something up in your skin, you're not the artist, you're just a canvas for somebody else... trash... a dupe.

Maybe it's different for jailbirds... prison culture and all... tear drops, and GANG STER crossing your knuckles. All do-it-yourself stuff with ink from burnt matches or charcoaled dixie cups. Infections are rampant... hepatitis and worse. But you're all set up for carnie life after the pen.

Jesus Freaks will go tat head... crowns of thorns for their noggins and so on. Christ had one too... Mary in Nazareth, on her knees in prayer, a heavenly ray burning sacred heart ink onto her breast, tattoo in tattoo, while knocking her up with Little Lord Baby Himself.

Don Nichols' florid ink read "Rosemary" on his right forearm. He got it in the Navy. He loved Rosemary fiercely and beat her every Saturday night. She died in a car wreck, and Don married her sister, Lois. What must she have felt whenever Don lifted a Falstaff or lit his Chesterfield straight?

The Fraulein Hoess never remarked those little SS bolts on his left wrist as Herr Rudolph jellied his toast. But a hundred meters away, still in view of the Hoess breakfast nook, the smokestacks belched away. Of course Hoess had had those Auschwitz Jews IDed with ink; they'd shared that.

I'd thought about all this with my bagel, and she'd waited, plotting how to come at me, how to knock me out. She'd sipped her coffee... and sipped at it again before she started.

"You act all tolerant and hip, but you're not. That's all. You just can't take the permanence of it, no matter how beautiful. You can't stand the commitment."

She was right, and I'd known she was from the beginning. And I'd also known she'd tattoo my ass, and she had tattooed it.

"Yup," I'd answered, "Sure as hell," but she still hadn't changed my mind.

