

Maggie Answers Aunt Sylvia's Question

by
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Some things you just realize you know, like how to behave on the subway. Other things you have to study and practice, like a new language or how to stand on your head. One thing I made it my business to learn about is tattoo. How I did it was I spent a certain amount of time around what used to be called the *parlors*, watching the work being done, studying the flash on the walls and in the books. In Chicago I mostly liked the place on Clark Street, not far from Wrigley Field, where a guy I met named Buster had a chair. He left town in 1975 and went to Hollywood to open his own shop; we heard his first star job was Barbra Streisand, but of course I don't know if that's true. The thing was, he went to art school, so everybody knew he wouldn't stay at a shop under the el tracks.

I hung around the local artists and read about the famous ones, their style and attitude and how different they could be—some guys wanting it to be art, some laughing at that even when it was. I heard them talk about single needles, slender like wires, and bunches soldered into three, five, seven or nine-liners. They knew the speed of the gun by sound, they could tell if it was racing or dragging. They'd say, Let's go seven-wide on this one, and make thick curves, blending their fast little circles, mixing their own color when the basics couldn't take them where they wanted to go. Pretty quick I learned that work done over bone and tendon hurt more than work over muscle and fat, and I felt the stinging cut of the thinnest needle on the inside flesh of my elbow. Once I took my vacation in San Francisco so I could visit Lyle Tuttle's museum and studio. I read tattoo magazines and taped their pages up on my walls. I read books about Japan, New Guinea, and lots of American sailors. I never found anything that turned me off. I read about people all over the world who used tattoo for thousands of years. For them, tattooing was a ritual, a sacred mystery. What I learned is that tattooing is magic, so I joined right up.

People always ask the same questions, even now, when all the kids are tattooed so it's everywhere, thirty years after I started. I answer truthfully: Yes, it hurts; but you know, it's over so quickly, and then you have this picture in your skin, part of you for the rest of your life. How many things that hurt you leave you marked with magic? Not too many, right? Because the question, Did it hurt? always makes me think, Compared to what? Getting hit in the head with a baseball bat?

Whiplash? Paper cuts? How about childbirth? What are we talking about here? What do they mean, what are they actually thinking, when they ask about pain? There was that one woman I met at a party—she had a blue orchid on her breast—who whisper-talked about how pain was one of the things that really *excited* her about tattooing, but she was strange; no one else ever said that to me. People who are into pain can always find something that'll last longer and go deeper than the quick silver needles of tattoo.

So yes, it hurts. But no, I'm not afraid of getting a disease. These days that's a hot one, lots more people wonder about that now; they're thinking AIDS, hepatitis—the big stuff. But I say, No, I'm not afraid, because I'm thoughtful, you know? I choose these people the way you choose anybody you pay to touch your body: carefully. How did you choose your doctor, your barber? How about people who give you a massage? They never thought about it that way. Some of them are afraid of needles; turns out that's pretty common. So they don't get vaccinations, they don't get acupuncture, and there's no danger they'll turn out junkies.

Talking to needlephobes, I got a surprise from my own memory. Here's the thing: I was tattooed as a child. When I was in third grade at Horace Mann School in Gary, Indiana, they had a plan to mark American citizens with our blood type, so it wouldn't matter if we were ever unconscious and didn't have our wallet emergency cards and couldn't tell the medics what to shoot through the IV. Maybe it was a Cold War thing, like the bomb drills where we rushed out into the halls and crouched against the lockers; I don't know. They hung sheets on dividers across the stage in the auditorium and lined up everybody from kindergarten through twelfth grade in the aisles. When you got to the stage, you climbed the stairs and went into a little sheet-walled cubicle where a man in a white uniform lifted up your striped tee-shirt and shot A, B, AB or O + or - into your ribs with what he called "the needle gun." They told us, like they always do, that it wouldn't hurt, and they gave us a note to take home to our parents explaining the marks on our skin. Those were the days when schools would pretty much do what they wanted, and parents were pretty much grateful for whatever that was. But the little letters they shot at me did not last. That first tattoo has disappeared; I have no trace left of my O+, and will never know if it could have saved my life when the Russians sailed into the Great Lakes and invaded Gary.

So no wonder I was never surprised that small children are the best tattoo observers. They're completely honest, and there's a lot they want

to know: What is that? Where'd you get it? Could you have any picture you want? Can you change it? Can you get more? Could I get one? Could you give me one? I know their parents want me to say things like, It's not for children. It really hurts a lot. You have to wait until you grow up. But I don't. I'm always straight with them and after I tell them about the needles, I tell them to use fake tattoos to try out designs until they find what they want to have forever. Children love to think about forever.

There was a time when people would ask me if it was *permanent*. Then, maybe in the early nineties, they started to ask if it was *real*; but hardly anybody asks those questions now, because having a tattoo now is about as distinctive as having freckles, you know? Like, some people have 'em, some people don't, it's no big deal, nothing to talk about. And this is too bad, because I realized somewhere along the years that I liked being stared at in the summer when so many of them showed. And I liked being a surprise in the winter; people couldn't hold onto their assumptions when I rolled up my sleeves. The manager and vitamin buyer of the biggest upscale health food store in the Midwest was *not* a skank—and they already knew that, so they had to adjust their minds when they saw my tattoos. They were used to asking my advice, used to hearing me say things like: It's best to use a supplement that has equal amounts of bioflavonoid and vitamin C. Or: Remember, large daily quantities of vitamin C may cause frequent urination. They didn't associate the use of phrases like "may cause frequent urination" with images they might have of tattooed women, so they had to adjust their minds. I liked that.

Some people couldn't adjust, of course. Some people didn't want to. My Aunt Sylvia said to me, when I showed her my first one, done by Buster on my thirtieth birthday—I remember exactly what she said: But Maggie honey, why would you want to do that to yourself? She sounded repulsed, maybe offended, so I didn't even try to explain; I knew she was one of those people. But I always thought up things to say to the people who were not repulsed, the ones who were drawn to me out on the street, attracted by my illustrations, excited by the thought of what I'd done.

So, why did I do it? First of all, I found out I could have beauty. I looked in the mirror in 1970, and saw that I was news. By the time of my birthday I was getting used to it. Like I would be at the lake, and my hair would be blowing across my face and the sun would be shining through so it had more colors than only brown, or I would look down at the shape of my thighs in tight jeans, or I would lay back and watch somebody's hands move up my belly on their way to my breasts. I was

thirty and realized that even if I only got thirty years more, starting right then I had my whole life to live over. I wanted to celebrate. I wanted to decorate myself. I never felt like a lily, so this was no gilding; it was more like what you get when somebody pins a blue ribbon on your shirt, hangs a medal on a shiny chain around your neck. That first tattoo was a ceremonial marker. It was a sign that said I knew who I was, and if you read my sign you would know too. Most of the signs from before that time said CAUTION or YIELD or STOP, but I was done with those.

Some things you do on purpose because they're smart, some you do because they'll make you laugh. Other things maybe make you feel strong, or sexy; they remind you of your best dreams. Some you do for beauty as much as anything else, and that's got to be the case with tattoo. When I started out, women getting done was still unusual, especially if you weren't a biker chick or a hooker. Women with visible tattoos had power of a kind I'd never imagined. Guys on the street were surprised; they were turned on, they dug it; it made them stop pushing the way they usually do. You know how they are, like if their kissy lips don't make you spread your legs right there on the sidewalk, then you're an ugly bitch? But with tattoos, those men changed. They acted like they thought I could bust them; they were willing to watch me go by without paying their toll. And without the toll, I wanted them to watch. I wanted everybody to watch.

I answered an ad in the free weekly to model for a photographer's show up on North Halsted, and got a full set of prints as payment for the session. The guy showed up with boxes of gear and had me change clothes a lot so he could get shots with different ones showing. On the walls of the gallery, the card by each photo listed artists' names for all the tattoos. Buster, who had done a couple more for me after my birthday, liked the publicity so much he offered to do my next one free. But when I came in for it we had a fight, because he said he wouldn't put a black rose on a woman. He said he wouldn't do a blossom without the leaves either, no stem or thorns. And that was what I wanted: the blossom of a partly-open black rose, heart like a cervix. He pointed out that this was his opinion and he was entitled to it. I've never disagreed with that particular position, and since he was nowhere near the only game in town, I dropped the subject. Buster had already given my right shoulder some Japanese waves cresting over rocks, put a sleeping tiger on my left hip and wound a daisy chain around my right wrist. But after the fight, like people say, we agreed to disagree.

I never did get a butterfly on my ass, a rosebud on my breast, a

little red heart on my thigh. That's what they expected women to get in those days, when I started getting tattooed. Janis Joplin, with her sweet Raggedy Ann "I love you," probably influenced some of us, but I can't remember any other star getting a tattoo that mattered. Anyway, the bear, the goldfish and the black rose were all done by Cal, who had no opinions. Cal's chair was in the back; you couldn't see him from the street. Written on his mirror were words from a song by The Band: "... *ain't no pretender/wanna see my tattoo?*" When Buster was gone, one day I was hanging around and Cal said, Lady, you want a black rose, no stem, no leaves? I'll give you a black rose. Sit down and show me where you want it. He was a quiet guy with a good memory. He had sat for three years listening to Buster's music (opera), conversation (self-referential) and arguments (see above, and also below). He looked at what you brought in to show him, listened to what you said. Then he'd say, I can do that. Sometimes while he was working on you, he'd say, This part's gonna hurt. Or with a really big job, he might say, Let's take a little breather here.

I sent my girlfriends to Cal; it was like finding somebody great to cut your hair. Buster was probably the best artist around before he blew us all off, but he was missing a lot of points on the personality scale. Olivia, who was six feet tall and wanted a big fat red rose on her bicep, couldn't get it from Buster; he insisted that a red rose on a woman should be small, and never on a bicep. So she got what she wanted from Cal, though Buster willingly translated designs from her tarot deck onto her wrists and put a pair of blue carnations on her ankle. Janine, a tiny woman with thick black wavy hair that made a cape across her neck, got a viper twisted around her upper arm—from Cal, of course. You see the pattern here. But Buster put the pair of ruby hummingbirds on Janine's shoulder blades, and they are still remarkable, even now when they've faded some.

Clark Street Tattoo had great flash and some seriously talented guys in the 1970's, no question about it. You could see that as soon as you came in the door. Most shops had pretty much the same work on the walls and not much else, but these boys had great stuff of their own. There was a whole section on the solar system, and you could get the Milky Way spread across your back. I loved to be there, to watch them doing it, to listen to people who came in telling what they wanted, to see the designs come out of the books and onto the skin. They had the usual exotic cars, but they had a jeep and a VW bus, too. They had license plates with state slogans; New Hampshire's *Live Free or Die* was popular, up there next to all the guns and ammo. Those you see everywhere, but these guys had a cannon good enough for any

courthouse lawn.

Like all the parlors, Clark Street had some mean looking rats and a few cute mice, but their snakes were fabulous, fanged and coiled; cobras that started at \$150 were rising, spreading their hoods open in any color you wanted. Coral snakes would slither around your wrist or neck or—for hundreds more dollars—they'd slide around your whole body, ankle to neck, each loop another \$65. There were mustangs and thoroughbreds, and blue and white unicorns in any size you wanted—some lying down beside their virgins, who always had hair like Joni Mitchell.

They had some dogs, but no cats (this was before the boom in cats as product). Lots of lions, though, and tigers, black panthers and darkly spotted leopards—some with flames coming out of their nostrils. There were a few deer in calendar print poses and a copy of Disney's Bambi, solo, but I never saw anybody choose them.

Once I drove out to a tent circus in Pecatonica to meet the tattooed woman. She had all the presidents of the United States—Garfield and Cleveland incorporated her elbows into the lines of their faces, FDR and his cousin Teddy's chins curved over her shoulders. She was born to it. Her father and brothers were acrobats, she told me, pointing to a trapeze artist flying over one thigh and a pyramid of men in tights stretching around the other. Across her belly, her own mother did a handstand on the bare back of a horse that looked just like Trigger. She had a full blown red rose on each breast, the tips of her nipples centering their petals; a slim bright snake circled her neck, its head and forked tongue darting down her collar bone. The stems of the roses and the snake's tail slipped between the presidents' heads, dark green leaves and bright yellow diamonds in sharp contrast to the complexions of a new Lyndon Johnson and an old James Madison. She had no empty space but her face; even her hands and feet were done, her fingers and toes in colored stripes like the rainbow that curved around her right hip, slipping back into the crease between the cheeks of her ass, suggesting a tiny pot of gold inside. She was amused by me with my half dozen pictures, but she was kind, sharing her tuna sandwich and telling me stories about her lover, a juggler. The lover was also tattooed, and traveled with the circus in season, but wouldn't show herself to anybody who didn't have work of their own; she didn't feel good about that.

Well, it's a youth thing now, and it's high art; nearly every punk in the back of the Broadway bus has good work: designs from New Guinea, totems from the Pacific Northwest nations, Celtic symbols. And these

are kids who are going to colleges with ivy all over their bricks, kids with money. There was a little while in the early nineties when the young ones first took it up, there'd be kids who would stop to talk, to ask about the work and show their own stuff, just like anybody who comes up and says, Nice tattoo—nice work, and then shows me theirs. But this hardly ever happens anymore with the young ones. I guess most kids don't think it's cool to talk to a woman my age about anything, maybe especially about something they think is theirs. You know how kids always need to own anything that matters to them? Like it's got to be their thing, and it can't be your thing, and if it is your thing then they don't want it to be their thing anymore? Like that.

But the ones who do their own, in the joint or in the alley, scratching with pins they clean in the flame of a match, are still what they always were: outlaws, and their markers look as rough as ever. I met a few in my day. We say that when we get over fifty—*in my day*—as if our days were not the same as anybody's, or at least overlapping. But I did know some people who rolled their own. Marco, the guy who used to sweep up at the barber shop next door to where I work, had designs all up and down his arms, mostly cars and eagles. He'd done the ones on his left arm, he explained, but the right arm was done by his uncle, who taught him how to do it. He learned how in high school, Marco said. You can bet that's mostly all what my uncle learned in high school. He said he had some on his legs too, but he didn't offer to show them, and that was ok with me.

One night I met a fifteen year old girl in a holding tank at the women's lockup on Eleventh and State. Don't even ask what I was doing there. She was five months pregnant and had scratched her baby's name into her arm: Buddy. Even if it's a girl, I'm gonna call it Buddy, she said. That's my brother's name. He's in Vietnam. She had a southern accent and skin so white her veins showed bluer than the tattoo.

Marco and Buddy's mama seemed to me to want the same thing I did from the pictures in our skin. This was a while ago now, when a lot of us were kind of affectionate about our tattoos, proprietary but willing to share in our special kind of show-and-tell. Me, I always hated to see a new tattoo disappear under the bandage. Just done, they were so bright, the skin all wet and slightly swollen like sex—but I did get off on the waiting time, when you'd be walking around with the design all wrapped up, and everybody would say, What happened? I'd uncover mine about twenty times a day, to rub whatever the guy told me onto the scab, making the tattoo shine again for a minute.

Once I went to a party with a strip of disposable diaper wrapped around my wrist—that was the bandage of choice at the time, like these dental bibs they use in some shops now. That night I wore my Frye boots, a red knit halter top and a long skirt, the kind we made out of old jeans. We would cut open the legs and stitch fabric into the openings, front and back; mine had velvet patches in front and silk neckties in back. I looked pretty hot, but the eye catcher at that party was definitely my wrist. Women and men came up to me, pointed at my wrist, touched it, even lifted it—gently, so sweetly they reached for that wrist, as if it were a baby, there in its diaper. They crooned, Aw, what happened? What’s the matter? Are you hurt? And when I told them it was a new tattoo, a daisy chain, just done that day, they stroked the skin around the bandage, stroked my hand, said ooh and ahh and oh. They wanted to know when it would be done, healed, ready. When they could see it. Would I call them when I took off the bandage, could they watch when I took off the bandage, could they come over and help me take off the bandage? That tattoo got more action all covered up than the ones already out on my arms and shoulders.

I still visit tattoo parlors when I travel, but I think my skin is too slack for new work. I’m over sixty, after all, so I’ll probably stick with what I’ve got. If I do decide to go for more, I’d like to find an artist my age, maybe a woman who’s seen all this go by, like me. I never got tattooed by a woman; I was too early. And maybe I’d pick out a classic, right off the flash on the wall. Maybe I’d get a ribbon; I’ve never done that, never had a word put on my body. What word would it be? Not my own name; I carry ID for that. What if I pick a name no one I know even has, and then be mysterious about it when people ask? *Pansy, Maritza or Franklin*. Maybe a slogan, like the boys: *Born to Raise Organic Vegetables*. Or I could just pick a word I like the sound of: *crunchy, illumination, queen*. Maybe a comment, like Very Funny. Let people make what they want to out of that.

I don’t know. I’ll just have to see what happens when I walk into a shop. Once in St. Louis—this was maybe twenty years ago—I stood at the counter and copied down the words of a sign stuck up over the curtain to the back room. When I got home, I printed out the words and put them up over my mirror. It still makes me smile when I read it: *The difference between tattooed people and people without tattoos is that tattooed people never ask you why you’re not tattooed.*

