

Temporary Tattoo

by Don Newcomb

I couldn't decide which tattoo to get. Hot tropics temptress? Heart crucified on a thorn? Perhaps the leering skull.

"Get MOM," suggested Jamella, a friend from undergrad days and today my mate at the AIDS soup kitchen information table. At this year's Gay Pride street fair, there was a temporary-tattoo booth next to us.

"Jamella, my tattoo must excite the natives."

"All right, then: DADDY."

Jamella was not to be trusted. She didn't fully appreciate my outer beauty. She has even, on occasion, sabotaged it. Our sophomore year, she permed my hair, leaving me a frizzy blond six-foot lollipop. I realized I would have to wait for Tony. He would know the right tattoo. He appreciated my outer beauty.

As people began to line up at the tattoo booth, other revelers celebrated on this narrow side street of New York City. The drag queen "talent" booth and the music vendor across the street competed for aural supremacy. Multipierced lesbians, gay Gap couples and shirtless singles checked out politically correct merchandise, erotic edibles and one another. Bands of toned clones platooned forward, tanned and chatty. Many revelers wore buttons, badges, even bumper stickers on protruding body parts to show that they shared my purported sexuality. Alleged because there hadn't been any proof in weeks, but last night Tony had called; soon there'd be fresh proof.

I had met Tony, a Long Island accountant and bowling pro, at last year's street fair. He had sidled up for a brochure about our AIDS soup kitchen but snatched my number instead. While supporting this nonprofit organization was reason enough to set up the tables, cart the brochures and rattle the can for donations, meeting Tony had been a great bonus.

The music vendor put on *Love Machine*, a classic to which I had danced with Tony on our first date. We had dinner that night, but I don't remember the meal, only his hazel eyes and

half-smiles. When we got to the Roxy, it was already crowded, a welcome excuse to hold hands. On the pulsing dance floor, he continually caressed me till I lost track of the insistent beat. The memory of that first, sweaty, romantic night made me undulate to the 1976 hit.

“Hey, snake hips! You don’t need no tattoo!” said Jamella. “You already bad.”

“Dance with me, Jamella.”

Jamella vigorously rotated her head. “I’m moving. I’m moving.” The rest of her—and there was a lot—stayed in the folding chair.

I closed my eyes, remembering subsequent nights with Tony. How we’d share a shower, lingering and soapy. How he pleaded to have his back scratched, arching for my touch. How, in bed, he was a firm practitioner of the golden rule: doing unto me as I did unto him. I recalled his warmth blanketing me, then his heat overpowering me.

“Sweetie! Zip me!”

I opened my eyes to a musclebound Carmen Miranda, bananas pluming out of her fruit-salad headdress, a rose hennaed on her shaved chest. When she turned around for me to zip her red sequined dress, I had a heady sensation. I recognized the birthmark on her back.

“Larry?” I asked.

“It’s Larita today, sweetie.”

Larry and I had dated four years ago. We met at a birthday party where I was overwhelmed by his wit and his willingness. After four months he sent me a Virgin Mary Christmas card with an I’d-rather-just-be-friends note tucked inside. I gave Larita’s zipper an extra-energetic tug, catching a bit of her back hair.

“Oh, sorry,” I said.

“With anyone special these days?” Larita asked, straightening her straps.

“He’s coming by soon.”

“Is he full time?”

“Sometimes it’s full time.”

“Sometimes is not enough,” Larita stated,. She added, pointing to her rose, “Get a tattoo. That’ll keep him interested.”

“You have a recommendation?”

“A barbed-wire armband,” said Larita, then leaned in closely and stage-whispered from quivering, glittering lips. “It’ll make you look young. Well, younger.”

A meaningless hug, and Larita was gone, leaving behind a cloud of perfume and a clump of doubt. Tony was twelve years younger than I, but I was relentless in my daily push-ups and almost as vigilant with the sit-ups. Sometimes while chopping vegetables at the soup kitchen, I did have to stop to stretch my back, but doesn’t that happen to everyone? Besides, what could Larita see anyway, peering through those rhinestoned eyelashes?

The street fair bloomed, and I was kept busy greeting friends and familiar faces from my decade in New York. Soon after moving here from Pittsburgh, I had taken Ann Landers’ advice to heart, joining groups to find that special someone. I did meet special people: José, who loved his gaseous Chihuahua but found humans not quite so endearing; Dale, who preferred anonymous slaps to my caring touches; and Dean, whom I disappointed by wearing out-of-season neutrals to his Oscars cocktail party.

This year, I intended to join the Big Apple Bowling League to increase commonality with Tony. I’d learn to throw a strike, to pick up a four-ten split. I’d even buy bowling shoes. Surely then we’d be together more than at yearly street fairs and on scattered Saturday nights.

“What you so happy about?” asked Jamella, munching on a “somehow got ruined” brownie.

“Tony’s coming by.”

“That bad-news boy?”

Jamella was jealous. She’d recently had a run of bad luck with girlfriends, so bad that she’d even, for a while, switched to men. Currently her love life was a vibrator named You Lucky Duck and a drawerful of C batteries.

“He’s not bad news.”

“He’s no good for you, baby,” said Jamella. “He comes, he goes. You know what I mean. Give it up!”

Jamella could get snippy when she had a bit of a point. It was difficult for Tony to linger after our passion was spent. He shared a house on Long Island with his sister, who didn’t know his “situation.” He worked long hours looking for loopholes, and his few free hours were mostly devoted to bowling tournaments.

“Jamella, he’s a busy man.”

“He’s dirty water. Down the drain with him. That is, if he shows up.”

Tony had broken our dates a few times but was always contrite. I scanned the crowd for his dark, Marine-cropped hair. Or was his hair long and parted now? It had been one month, two weeks and one day since I’d gotten his last could-I-come-all-over-you? call. But hadn’t that night gone well? When he got up to catch his train, I didn’t subtly suggest, calmly beg or overtly plead that he stay for the night but sent him on his way with a few of my double-chocolate-chip cookies.

I don’t know how anyone lives with the hollowness of too many nights of video rentals without dating Long Island bowling accountants. My twenties were gone, my thirties fleeing. Nowadays I rarely got checked out at the deli or smiled at on the crosswalk. Instead, most strangers’ glances were quick and cutting. My wrinkles were beyond botox. My pants, once a 30 waist, were now more comfortable at a 34.

No one, besides Tony, had asked for more than a brochure in the last five years I had volunteered at this street fair. Was my lack of tattooed charm keeping away the one who would want a morning after? I looked at the tattoo booth and saw two mustachioed men leaning on each other. They had matching cougar tattoos. Perhaps that would be my answer. An animal tattoo.

“Uh oh. Here comes dirty water,” muttered Jamella.

“Hey, beautiful! Got any brochures?” asked Tony.

“Oh, hi there, Tony,” I said.

“Thinking about me?” asked Tony with an appropriate squeeze. “Hey, Jamella,” he added with an air kiss.

“Tony,” she kissed back. They had met once, and that had been enough for both.

“Wanna get some food?” Tony asked me. “Maybe a slice?”

“Now?”

“I’m famished!”

“Well, okay. Then you can help me pick out a tattoo. Jamella is hopeless.”

Jamella squawked. “Get your mean self out of here.”

“Be back soon,” I assured her.

“Ha!” she answered.

I tried to remain cool, to stay casual, but the trouble with Tony was that he fit so well at my side. He grabbed my arm and draped it over his shoulders. His arm went around my sucked-in waist. While we walked crosstown, he looked at me with that half-smile, then rubbed his head against my chest.

“I’ve missed you,” said Tony.

I kissed his forehead, he kissed my cheek, then we stopped all progress toward the pizza parlor.

“Nice,” said Tony rubbing his hands up and down my back.

“Absolutely,” I replied, trapping his head in my hands for a lingering kiss.

When we did reach the pizza parlor, we ordered our slices, shared more kisses, then sat as far from the tinny speakers as possible. Someone was playing that new dance music that you cannot dance to. Between bites, his hand drifted up my inner thigh while I massaged his chest. A pen in his T-shirt pocket was in the way, so I poached it.

“You’re cooking the books on parade day?” I asked.

“Can’t go without it. CPAs always have a pen.”

I rolled up his sleeve and drew a heart on his arm.

“What are you doing?” he said, swatting my hand away.

“Giving you a tattoo. What do you want in your heart?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“That’s what you got,” I said, perhaps a tad too quickly.

Tony pretended to play along, but I could tell he was calculating what he’d say to his housemate sister about his inked-on heart.

“Your turn,” I said, sure that my push-up-pumped triceps would inspire him.

Tony grabbed the pen and drew a surprisingly artistic (for a CPA) heart and then wrote a word within it.

“What does that say?” I asked. “Weedy?”

“Needy.”

“Oh.” I took another bite of my pizza. The tomato sauce bled down my chin. As I reached for a napkin, the pizza-parlor door opened with a shriek. Still shimmering in her red dress, Larita entered. She paused, then posed, then spied me.

“Sweetie!” Larita said, toppling our way. “Is this your sometimes man? He is gorgeous!”

“Ah, thanks,” said Tony as Larita slid into his lap.

“Larry—I mean Larita,” I said, “this is Tony.”

After an extended smooch on Tony’s cheek, Larita stood up. “It’s been your pleasure, I’m sure.” She journeyed onward to the takeout counter.

Tony pulled his thigh away.

“She’s high. Just yapping,” I said to put the warmth back in his touch.

“You have to stop pushing me,” he said.

“What’d I do?”

“The heart.”

“They’d charge ten dollars at the booth. But from me? A kiss.” I got ready for the payment plan, but Tony had more to say.

“You didn’t even ask,” said Tony spitting on a napkin.

“Sorry.” I set down my unfinished slice to watch Tony scrub away the remains of my heart. When only a faint trace remained, he returned to his pizza and to me.

“I’m not much for surprises,” said Tony. He gave me a conciliatory squeeze but not the payment kiss. I picked up my slice, but I had lost my appetite. I really had wanted pepperoni but had gotten plain so Tony wouldn’t have to wait for me.

“So, do you wanna go to your place?” asked Tony, finishing his slice.

“Could you help me pick out a tattoo first?”

“You want a tattoo instead of this?” said Tony, nuzzling my ear.

“Both,” I said. “Tattoo, then you.”

Tony sat back and deliberately rolled down his sleeve.

“They’ve got cougars,” I said with a small smile.

“Sorry, beautiful. Got a train to catch. Can’t do both.” Tony pointed to his watch to support his alibi.

“I get it,” I replied.

I rubbed Tony’s bristly hair, then slid out of the patched vinyl booth. I grabbed a slice with extra cheese for Jamella, then walked back alone to the tattoo booth, where I looked at the stars and crescent moons.