

# MY TATTOO

BY J. PAUL BARRETT

"You take a bottle of India ink, an' a needle, an' a cork, an' you stick the eye of the needle into the cork and dip the sharp end into the ink."

The instructions for giving myself a tattoo came something like that in my 13th year. Of course, having such esoteric and valuable information I just had to give it a try.

It seems an astonishingly stupid thing to have done at this writing more than forty years later; but as it is with many things, it seemed like the thing to do at the time.

With needle in cork and beer in hand, I crudely and permanently marked my arm with the letter "P" for "Paul."

When I joined the Navy in 1959 I found tattoos were in vogue. Everybody seemed to have them. On my single day of liberty in San Diego during basic training I had my jailhouse-style tattoo covered at a "professional" tattoo parlor. I selected an old English-style capital letter P (I know, it's stupid. I was just a dumb kid.) The young woman who did the tattoo was apparently just learning the business. I surmise, from the appearance of the tattoo, she was given mine to do because of its simplicity. But that didn't matter. I had chosen a lovely Irish emerald green for the main color of the P, with a black border. It looked pretty good on the wall, but not on my arm.

I thought for a year or so of covering it with a big palm tree or something, but I realized I didn't really want *any* tattoos, and I regretted having done something so permanent to myself. But there was little that could be done. Then I heard of "tattoo removal" in Asia, where my ship was headed.

When we got to Hong Kong I planned to find a tattoo removal specialist. But first it was necessary for an 18 year old sailor to get very drunk in many bars. Necessary? Hell I considered it *mandatory*. I think I introduced the British Army to red beer. I had a little money, but more was readily available aboard ship from several "slush funds" at \$5 now for \$7; or \$10 for \$14 on payday. It wasn't difficult, however, to conclude that in a place where \$10 could be worth \$100, \$10 was certainly worth \$14.

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DRAWING BY ROGER HAYES

"TATTOO REMOVAL" says a sign on a Hong Kong tattoo parlor. I go in. Sure, no problem, a man who looks like Dr. Frankenstein's oriental sibling tells me. No problem. He gives me a San Miguel beer and I sit down and watch him gather his implements: an electric tattoo needle, a jar of what I assume is either water or liquid bleach, another jar of white powder, which I surmise is some kind of powdered bleach; and a stack of rough, brown, industrial-grade towels.

The Chinese man dips the needle into the liquid, then into the powder. He grabs a handful of towels in one hand and proceeds to move the stinging needles over the entire surface of my tattoo, again and again, wiping away the blood with the stiff towels.

"Any more beer?"

Somebody hands me another, already opened, and a fresh one every time my bottle is empty.

The pain is ridiculous. I drink. I want to be rid of the tattoo. I drink more, downing at least ten bottles in the hour-and-a-half I sit there. Judging from the growing mass of bloodied towels in the wastebasket on the floor I figure I've lost at least a couple of bottles of beer in blood. My arm is a mass of red pulp, within which there's no trace of the tattoo. The pain is absurd.

My torturer continues, dipping, dipping, then up and down, side to side over my tattoo, wiping every pass, mopping up the blood, which is now flowing profusely. The pain is preposterous. I squeeze the beer bottle until I'm afraid it will pop. Frank shows me his teeth occasionally, bobbing his head as if to assure me that everything is going well. He grins widely, displaying proudly those huge, gray, Great Wall of China teeth.

Then finally it's over, but the tattoo man keeps wiping as the blood wells, over and again. He tells me to hold a big wad of towels to what is now a shotgun wound in my arm, so I move the bottle to my left hand and drink. He prepares a stack of towels,

places them over the allegedly removed tattoo, of which he says smiling triumphantly, "All gone now. No more tattoo." Then he fastens the towel to my arm with masking tape.

I pay him, walk back into the greasy street and stagger through the miserable Wan Chi district, to the dock, from which the motor launch will take me back to the ship.

We are underway the next day for two weeks, on to the Philippines, then another stop at Sassed, Japan. Unless I return someday, Hong Kong will remain a memory.

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I changed the "bandage" on the second day out. The site was beginning to itch. What had been a poor tattoo on my arm was now a greenish, swollen injury with an angry scarlet border. I kept the puffy, oozing thing covered, changing the bandage regularly. I did not show it to the corpsman on board. A huge ugly scab formed. I'd never seen a green scab. It was impossible not to mess with it. I wanted to see what was underneath.

During the second week the horrid, moldy-looking slab of bark began to lift around the edges. Miraculously, there was no infection; but, as we neared port the ship received an official message, which was copied and passed around to the crew. It was a warning to sailors who planned to get tattoos in Hong Kong, which we had just left (typical Navy communication). The rate of contraction of syphilis by tattoo had been estimated at fifteen percent.

When I was able to pry the edge of the scab up enough to see under it, most of the tattoo was still there, but now it was a mottled, passed-off black and green, unrecognizable as a letter of any alphabet or anything else. It was a mess, even more unattractive than before.

We made port and docked near a destroyer tender, in which resided a real Navy doctor. I was tested for syphilis and sweated it out until the negative result came in days later. The doctor offered to try to remove the ugly tattoo surgically, by taking a slice from the center and sewing up the two sides. It might take several operations, he said.

This doctor surged and we went to sea again, this time headed for Okinawa. Now the ruined tattoo on my arm had a big nasty vertical scar through the center. I didn't go back.

Nowadays (1995) tattoos can be easily removed by laser, so I suppose if I really wanted to I could probably get the tattoo off my arm for good. But the scar would remain. Why bother? I'm marked for life, but so what?

That aging green mess on my arm serves a useful purpose: anytime I'm feeling full of myself, I have only to glance at my ravaged tattoo -- living proof -- which reminds me of what an idiot I'm capable of being. I've also come to realize that it's not just the tattoo. Nothing in life really goes away. It's all still there, everything. You can take a turd out of the punchbowl, but you'll always know it was there.

"My Tattoo" is from Paul Barrett's latest book of short stories, *I'll Be Home In Half-an-Hour*, which is just off the press of his own Gaff Press in Astoria. (An earlier story in the collection, "Wetsuit" appeared in the December 1993 NCTE) He is the author of *Sea Stories I & II (Of Dolphins & Dead Sailors: Sungods & Sundogs)* and *How To Make A Book*.

Roger Hayes lives in Astoria. His artwork and illustrations have appeared in several issues of the NCTE, including for Paul Barrett's "Wetsuit." One of his paintings illustrates the cover of *I'll Be Home In Half-an-Hour*.

## PROSE

I envy poets. Their wide margins. They can write 40 or 50 words and then they're done. And they get away with it. Sort of. Nobody much reads them, but they still go to bed at night thinking they've done their job. Those of us who don't cheat, who write prose and call it prose, have to fill a page with dense type, one inch margins at the most, complete sentences with all the words left in, rules of punctuation adhered to. Most people think writing poetry is hard, a venue reserved for only the gifted. Prose is more difficult, let me tell you. You think it's easy trying to come up with 800 to a thousand words? Give me 40 or 50 any time.

Prose writers have an advantage over poets, though. They are read, mostly, sometimes anyway (you're still reading, aren't you?). I don't know about you, but every time I stumble across a poem, usually in the *New Yorker*, I flip the page immediately, looking for a good cartoon, of which there are fewer and fewer. Sometimes I'll even study the ads to avoid reading the latest by Ashbery or Simec. Once in awhile I'll give in and read the goddamn poem, and inevitably end up crying "Fudge!" Sometimes something even stronger, like "Wallaby wallaby wallaby ganash ganash!" Thank god for a story by Garcia Marquez or a book review by John Updike or a piece by John McPhee. If their margins were wider we'd call it poetry -- but they're honest, and think of their stuff as prose.

The advantage poets have over us prose hacks is weight. We try to let our words fall on the page like autumn leaves, gently and quietly. Poets roll their words at you like bowling balls at an audience of wooden pins, hoping for a strike.

Gutter balls, mostly, making a racket but not much else. We prose writers, on the other hand, talk in a normal voice, across a couple of coffee cups. No incantations. No podium, even. We conquer by the most subtle of moves, rhythms you couldn't diagram in a hundred years. We like to stretch a thought out like a rubber band, stretch it as far as it will go. Poets want to wad the rubber band up into a tangle, a little ball, and then expect us to chew on it.

We make room for humor, leave the doors wide open, believe in the moment. Poets prefer the knitted brow, believe in eternity. They want to make a difference, take themselves seriously. Poets must be earnest, sober, edged in black like an announcement of death. Otherwise the effort is doomed as light verse. Poets can't allow themselves to make rhymes, or regular lines. When their words inch over to the right margin they panic, have to begin a new line, with the next word, no matter the sense. The restrictions are overwhelming. Prose can do whatever it damn well pleases, and has no fear of getting too close to the edge of the paper.

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