

Tattoo

By Shauna Kelley

I know it wasn't her real name, that's just what we called her. She came in a lot and was infamous for the large, vacant smile that she wore like pride, along with her tattoo. Up until late June, I had never waited on her; she always managed to sit in someone else's section.

I had never actually seen it myself until I approached her table. It was hot outside, and she was visibly sweating, large pools of moisture collecting under her arms, gluing her shirt to her body. I tried hard not to look at her as I stood above the two of them, the other one presumably her husband- they were holding massive, sweaty hands.

"Hey, how you guys doing today? Can I get you something to drink?" I asked. She smiled, her enormous mouth giving way to reveal her teeth, which were white and neat, save for one or two missing here and there.

"Do you have Coke?" she asked loudly.

"Sure do, is that what I can get for you?"

"Yes," she said emphatically, pulling her hand away from her companion and crossing her arms. It was then that I got a good look at the tattoo, large letters sprawled across her arm in child-like script. "Jinny and Quinn- True Love!"

For a moment I really couldn't say much. The tattoo startled me, bothered me, but I didn't know why. Finally the "I'll have a Coke too," from across the table drew my attention to her companion. He was short, probably only an inch or two taller than she, and round, hair retreating from his face into a small semi-circle at the back of his head.

"Sure." I walked away from the table to get the drinks, my mind suddenly churning for some reason. I finished out my shift, delivering to Tattoo and company two cheeseburgers and applesauce. I noticed when I went to collect my tip- all twenty-five cents of it- that she had made a smiley face in her applesauce with catsup.

The phone was ringing as I walked in the door. I picked it out with a quick hello, noticing how hot and sticky I was. "Hey," Michael replied, his voice tired.

"Hey honey," I replied, flopping into a chair and trying to ignore the grease spots on my uniform. "What's up?"

"We're going out tonight, correct?"

"You know we are," I said. "We've had tickets for a month."

"Just checking," he replied. Michael had to be triple sure of everything. "What time should I pick you up?"

I checked my watch. I had gotten home earlier than planned, as aside from Tattoo and company the restaurant had been extremely slow. "What would you say to dinner first? We've hardly seen each other all week."

"I'd say OK- where do you want to go?" he asked.

"You pick," I said, "I need to go shower unless you want to go out with a grease ball."

"Tess," he said, "That's gross."

It was all I could do not to giggle at his obvious disgust as I hung up the phone and began to undress for the shower, dropping clothes along the stairs as I headed up to my room. I ignored the ringing phone and opened my closet door. Molly, my roommate, must have picked it up; it only rang twice. As I slipped into my bathrobe, she knocked on the door and slipped her head in.

"Tessie?" she called.

"Yeah?" I replied from behind the closet door where I stood, trying to decided what to wear.

"Mike just called," she said.

"Michael," I corrected her. He hated Mike, even nicknames were too simple for him.

"He said he's leaving in ten minutes and to be ready," she said.

"What," I moved from behind the door to face her. "I'm supposed to be showered and ready in less then half an hour?"

"Supposed to be," she leaned on the doorframe and regarded me lazily while yawning slightly. "I say make him wait. Would serve him right."

"I can't," I said, pulling a red silk dress off the hanger and throwing it on the bed as I charged by her towards the shower. "I'm never late."

"You're wearing that?" she said, following me into the bathroom.

"Yes, what's wrong with it?" I stepped into the shower and tested the water with my toe.

"I thought you were going to a concert," she said.

"We are, kind of, it's a symphony," I explained.

"Tess," she sighed dramatically, "I know you're smart and all, but you're also twenty one years old, don't you think its time you get a boyfriend your age?"

I yanked off my bathrobe and threw it at her from around the curtain. "He's only five years older than I am," I reminded her for the umpteenth time, dunking my head under the scalding water so I couldn't hear her response.

It felt as though the hot water was peeling layer upon layer of grease from my body. This was the worst part of working at a restaurant- being so gross. If the tips weren't good, aside from Tattoo and company, and the hours weren't short I knew I could find something better. Still, on days like this I kicked myself for quitting school with only a semester left before I got a degree. It hadn't even made sense at the time, just felt right.

After a long pause, in which I'm sure Molly was trying to decide if I would throw anything else, she added "or maybe just a boyfriend that doesn't act like he's 50." She ducked out quickly and closed the door behind her.

I hated it when she did that. Suddenly the cleansing feeling of the shower went away and my mind was churning again. I tried to quiet my thoughts- push the picture of Michael, bald and with no teeth, from my mind. However, as soon as I stopped thinking of him it seemed all I could think about was a rather large, sprawling tattoo.

I heard the doorbell ring as I was sliding into the red dress. I smiled at my reflection in the mirror slightly before grabbing a shawl and heading out the door.

"Pathetic," Michael muttered, slipping his arm around my waist. I smiled softly as he did it, relishing how natural it felt. "I'm very disappointed that I paid so much for those tickets."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled softly. I wasn't really listening, but leaning on him. His big body was so soft and warm beside me.

"It's not your fault," he said, continuing on with his diatribe. I had heard this all before, after many different shows. I put my head down, resting my ear on his side and listened to his voice reverberate through his chest. He talked all the way to the car, and when we got in and put on our seat belts, I realized he was on a different subject now.

"Don't you think that the neoclassic writers were by far superior to the romantics? I can't believe my professor even expected us to discuss it," he said.

"Well, I love Swift and Pope," I began, "but Wordsworth and Shelley..."

"...Were melodramatic and tired." His voice was definite, holding that don't-you-remember-that-I'm-in-grad-school-and-you-dropped-out-before-getting-your-BA-tone.

I didn't say much else on the drive home. We pulled up in front of my house and turned off the car.

"Hey," he said, "did I tell you how amazing you look tonight?" he asked.

I smiled. I loved it when he was like this- real- with me. "No, you didn't," I said, leaning over after unhooking my seat belt. I kissed him softly on the neck. He turned to me and smiled.

"You do."

"Thank you." He kissed me then, the kind of kiss I loved. At first it seemed like a simple good night kiss, supposed to be quick and soft. But he lingered for a moment, then another, then began to kiss me harder. Before I know it we were both breathless and clinging to each other.

I pulled away suddenly. "Do you want to come in?"

He looked at me, brushed stray hair away from my face. "I don't think that would be a good idea tonight. I have class early tomorrow."

He tried to kiss me again, but I backed away, pecked his cheek and got out of the car. He rolled down the window and called a promise to talk to me soon to my back. Every time this happened I wondered if I would see him again. It was a strange worry, we had been together for several months, but I couldn't help it nonetheless. I grappled with the concern that someday he would find someone else, someone that really listened and contributed, some grad student who could discuss these lofty matters, and then he would be done with me. Sometimes it made me sad, sometimes angry, sometimes it made me smile strangely.

All I could think of on my walk up to my house was Jinny and Quinn.

"Hey Tess, table five's up," someone called from the back. I was standing in the doorway of kitchen, noticing with a sinking feeling that Tattoo and company were back, and in my section.

"I'll be there in a moment," I yelled back. I hadn't stopped thinking about that tattoo for days, and had yet to understand what about it bothered me so much. I approached their table, noticing them holding hands again, took their order for two cokes, two hamburgers and applesauce again and withdrew to the kitchen.

Katie, a fellow waitress, approached me. "I see you got Tattoo. Lucky you."

I smiled at her. "I know, I wonder how I'll spend my quarter tonight."

She laughed. "At least you got a quarter-- I think they left me a dime once."

I mulled for a moment before asking "Katie, does that tattoo bother you?"

She regarded me quizzically. "Bother me? What do you mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "It just bugs me for some reason."

She gave me an exasperated look and walked out with an order. I followed her out, taking five's order with me.

Tattoo smiled at me broadly a few minutes later when I brought her the hamburger. "Thanks," she said loudly. "I love hamburgers."

"They are good," I said reflexively, then realizing I'd used the same tone I usually did with kids at my tables. I might have well have been asking her if she wanted some crayons. I braced myself, wondering how she would respond to my obviously condescending voice.

"They are," she agreed, then tore into her hamburger.

I stood for a moment, knowing I should leave but not able to walk away from some reason. Finally "Hey, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

She looked up and smiled. "No."

"Your tattoo, what made you decide to get it?"

She looked at the man across the table and grinned. "I love Quinn." She said simply, as though it were the most obvious response in the world.

"How do you know?"

She turned to stare at me sharply. The silence that followed seemed infinite and awkward. I stared- waiting for a response. She stared as though she didn't understand the question. We stared at each other for two minutes easily, before a fellow waitress grabbed me from behind and pulled me away. "Get it together, girl!" she hissed in my ear as she walked away.

I had hoped she would respond in some way as to relieve my mind of the burden of thinking of this so nonstop. Instead, she perplexed me more. I still couldn't decide why the tattoo haunted me, now accompanied with the image of her large, vacant grin. I thought about it all through the day and into the night.

I answered the door much later, puzzlement still etched on my face, to find Michael before me. "Hey," he said, coming in and kissing me hello. That helped to allay my pondering for a moment. It always made me feel so wonderful when he kissed me hello, like I was his, like everything was stable.

"Hey," I turned to watch him start up the stairs. "What are you doing here?"

He turned and grinned at me. "Class canceled, thought I would come and take you up on your offer from the other night." He started up the stairs again. I leaned against the front door and watching him walk, noticing how his back moved beneath his shirt, the fabric stretching over his shoulder blades, falling widely onto his small waist. I sighed, and followed him up the stairs. The mood was, to Michael, like everything else. Cut and dry- here or not.

I didn't see him when I first walked into my room, but as soon as I closed the door he pounced from behind it and began to kiss my neck and shoulders and ears. I shut my eyes and relished the feeling for a moment before wrapping my arms around his neck and making him kiss me. "You are so wonderful," he whispered to me.

"Am I?" I asked, walking away slightly.

"You are," he said. "I will never understand how someone as incredible as you would quit school." He kissed me again, but only for a second before I pulled from him.

"You don't understand?"

"No," he gave me a strange smile and leaned towards me. I leaned back.

"I've told you, though," I claimed.

"I know you have, but you are so bright, it doesn't make any sense."

I backed away from him, out of his reach, and sat on the corner of my bed. "It had nothing to do with being smart," I said. "It had to do with being dumb and in love and wanting to be with Mark more than anything."

He made clumsy love to me, then fell asleep beside me, his arm wrapped possessively around me. I tried to fall asleep too, always finding it easier when he was there. But thoughts of Tattoo- Jinny- returned to me.

I rolled to look at Michael's sleeping face and wondered how many more times I would feel this, him beside me, securely. I wondered if he would ever notice that I liked to be held really tightly during sex, liked to be kissed on the neck and not the ears, liked to talk afterwards about something like us. Normally, if he didn't sleep we talked of literature or music or politics. I knew all of Michael's views and opinions and he knew most of mine, but I wondered, watching him sleep, if I knew him. I wondered this often after we made love, and I wondered how many more times I would get to wonder this.

After several hours of sleeplessness I leaned over and began to kiss his chest softly, letting my lips glide softly over the smooth plane up his neck, to his ears. I knew he loved that. He stirred softly. "What are you doing?" he asked, smiling.

"Michael, do you want to marry me?"

His eyes shot open. "What?!"

"You heard me."

He sat up, gently knocking me off of his chest as he did. I scrambled to grab the sheet to cover my breasts. "Why do you ask?" He looked terrified.

"I just want to know."

"Tess, you know that depends on where I find work after school and what you're doing..."

"No," I interrupted him sharply. "I don't want to know if you will marry me, only if you want to."

"What kind of question is that?" he asked, getting out of bed and searching for his clothes.

"Where are you going? It's a perfectly legitimate question."

"I need to go to the bathroom," he said, pulling on his solid black boxers.

"No, you don't, you're walking out on a question you don't want to answer," I said.

"It's an unanswerable question," he spat, turning to face me. "I don't know why it matters if I want to marry you if we don't know how possible it is."

"It matters," I insisted. "I want to know if thinking about waking up next to me everyday makes you happy. I want to know if you love me."

"I like being with you," he said, standing in the center of the room. His features suddenly seemed sharp to me, harsh.

I stared at him for a while. "You don't love me," I said.

"It's not that," he tried to explain. "There are a lot of other factors that are important that have to be considered."

"No, there aren't," I said. "You either love me and want to be with me or you don't, simple. Doesn't require much thought."

"Everything requires thought," he retorted, and walked through the door to the bathroom.

While he was in the bathroom I pulled my clothes on and got back into bed to study my arm. It seemed small, fragile. I imagined the words "Tess and Mike- True Love!" scribbled on it

in childlike handwriting. It seemed ridiculous. Michael would probably make me research the effects of tattoo ink first, then debate about whether the dash was correct usage.

He came back later, silently, and slipped into bed. I could tell he was awake, lying beside me, thinking. I rolled over quickly, slipped my arms around him and pressed up against him. "Don't think, just answer. Are you happy right now?"

He paused for a moment, so I kneed him. "I said don't think, just tell me how you feel. Are you happy right now?"

"Yes," he breathed silently.

"Tell me what your biggest fear is," I said.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know and I should."

He told me- snakes- they made him cringe. It seemed funny to me; I thought he would pick something with an even smaller brain than a snake- something he could outthink rather than run away from.

I tried to think about this for a while, even after his breath grew regular and soft. I tried to decide how it made me feel, but I couldn't. I suddenly felt like Jinny, a large sloppy grin looming over my cheeseburger. Jinny, naked and out of place without a Quinn beside me.