

COURTNEY SENDER

The Laws that Divide the Day in Two

I'm sitting on a stool at the front of Black and White and Red All Over, thinking about how I'm going to quit, when the girl comes in asking for the numbers.

"What numbers?" I say, annoyed already because she's the type to talk for hours about kerning and serif and then faint at the sight of the needle.

"Five-three-oh-two-two," she says, rehearsed.

"Where you want them?"

"About here," she says, pointing just below the inside of her elbow.

"You want a band or what?" I say, and she says, "About like this," and takes out the picture of two black-and-white women, starving in a barracks under a swastika flag.

The first tattoo I did was for my twin brother, age eleven, a stovetop needle and broken blue-ink Bic.

"Why did you do this to your brother?" our mother screamed when we showed her in the kitchen. She poured dish soap on a brillo pad, held Jacob's arm up like a prizefighter, and scoured the cross I'd inked on his imagined bicep. Jay howled in pain, but the image didn't budge; it bled.

"Why?" she repeated.

"It's just art, Ma," I said.

Jay pointed at me with his clean arm. "To look different from him."

Jay has sleeves now. Last I saw him, he'd covered that shaky letter 't' with the dark ball of our mother's nose, but I can tell he used an amateur. I'd never ink eyes like those, blank as a scorched sidewalk, stuck inside Ma's excuse on Jacob's ropy bicep.

To this day, I won't do crosses. No Jesus, no pieta, no crucifix. I lose a lot of business that way, but I can't stand to see them bleed.

"You want to be a concentration camp inmate?" I say, squirming on my tripod behind the register, listening upstairs to the straining pipes that mean Ted's in a rare shower. Ten minutes he'll shampoo his hair, enough time to prove he's still got some; the tap in the steel sink down here will go cold halfway through. Water stains will start down his oldest designs, pinned to the top of the exposed-brick wall: impossible women with impossible breasts that melt slowly lower with every shower Ted's taken for the past ten years.

This wouldn't be the first time I've had a crazy

in, someone trying to get me in trouble. Mothers asking me to ink their babies, future cons wanting preemptive teardrops, gangs requesting signs—sometimes so innocuous I don't realize what they are until the fifth wrestler-sized guy in a week needs a feather on his second knuckle. But even in Baltimore the morning/afternoon shift usually stays clean, according to the laws that divide the day in two: I get the gigglers, Ted gets the strung-outs. I get the alcoholics, Ted gets the drunks. We both get the criers wanting their father's signature, their daughter's footprint, their favorite sister's zodiac. Sentimental stuff. People think tattoos are tough, but they're the most sentimental thing there is.

"Listen," I tell the girl, glancing at the women in the picture, each with long rows of numbers inside their forearms. "I'm no Nazi, see? I can't draw that on you."

The girl narrows her dark eyes at me. One eyelid stays wider than the other, like it's caught on a clothespin. She has blond curly hair and a body thick like an Amazonian goddess. I haven't gotten laid in months.

"Can't," she says, "or won't?"

"Won't," I say, real quick, because though Ted is a son-of-a-bitch whose ass I anonymously kick on Yelp, he shouldn't get the blame for my worthless morals. Swastikas, lynching scenes, cowboys shooting Indians, I tell them all: come back for that tonight. Ted says my morals keep getting heavier as my commissions gets lighter.

"That's a tattoo for a different girl," I explain.

"A girl with safety-pin earrings who cuts her arms

for fun."

"Even if I ask real nice?" she says, deep-voiced, leaning onto the counter and folding her arms high on her ribs so her chest hitches up toward her chin.

"Even then," I say.

"Even if I pay double under the table and promise not to tell anybody?" she says.

"Even if you pay triple," I say, and she lets out a laugh and launches herself backward off the counter.

"Then you're the guy I want to do it," she says, a whole octave higher. "Thank God. I've been walking everyplace in town, my feet hurt already."

I'm the only tattoo artist on the planet without one of my own. I'll get one someday, when I'm happy enough to dream up a moment worth keeping. But I respect the canvas, see? You don't blow your nose where Picasso's gonna paint a picture.

Ted told me I'd figure out what I wanted, working under him. He said he was a mentor, an apostle, a religious believer in the apprentice system, one sketched arm curled on his Betsy's growing belly, one arm guiding my novice hand, one arm extending straight to the ticklish sole of Jesus Christ.

Then Betsy's belly flatlined, Ted inked a ring of black thorns where his wedding band used to sit, his apprentice system crumbled to shit around me, and I needed to find a new job, stat, which I have failed to do. Noplace will hire a tattoo artist

without one of his own. I'm not trustworthy.

"Why'd you hire me, Ted?" I asked, one sad Friday night drinking wine straight from the box against the back wall, turned down by yet another parlor, this one all the way in Catonsville.

"You seemed clean," Ted said. He was running the gun over his calf, recasting yet another pair of initials inside an overcrowded heart. 'K' back to 'R' this time. Easy. Not like the Wendy he'd had to finagle into Rachel. "Like you'd stay put long enough for me to mold you."

"How'm I ever supposed to get another gig?" I said.

"You won't."

It's harder to quit when Ted and I are roommates, when I live in his spare room above the parlor and hear him sneak downstairs at night to break his fingers punching the brick wall behind the design displays. All his designs, not one of mine, or else I'd feel bad for the guy.

"Because I'm clean?" I asked.

"Because you're a pussy. Let me do you."

Ted talks like that—doing people—because he's not an artist anymore, just a sadist. The lady in Catonsville had been maternal about rejecting me—Some free advice, hon, she'd said: get a tattoo myself, or give up the profession.

More and more these days, I've thought of giving up.

"Listen," I say to the girl. "That's flattering and all, but I've got a kid at home. How can I pick him up from school—he gave a book report today, *Great Expectations*, stayed up all night

rehearsing into a tape recorder—and say, hey, boy, your dirtbag father did this thing the Nazis used to do, don't worry, it'll pay a minute of your college or a parking ticket."

The girl eyes me.

"Starlene," she says, extending a pristine hand too fast for me to shake. "53022. My Grandma Sho's number."

"What's your grandma gonna think of this?"

"My grandma's dead."

I look at the picture, two twenty-somethings more bones than body, in times so ancient even young people looked old. "Shit."

Starlene laughs, loudly. "Not of that! Jesus. Of time." A drop of Starlene's laugh-spit has landed on the photograph. I think about rubbing it clean. "You know. Old age?"

"Yeah," I say. "I'm familiar."

But I'm not. Ma died at 42, right in the middle of my grand plans for a mastectomy tattoo. She'd told us Dad had passed and we didn't know until the funeral that he wasn't dead, just a deadbeat in Seattle, but he dropped a couple roses and disappeared too fast for Jay to throw a single punch. The closest I know to old is Ted, whose sex schedule is eight times fuller than mine and twelve times louder. (But the same amount lonely.)

"Who needs old age?" my son Mikey asks, tugging the bottom of my shirt with the sleeve of his wool sweater, a big book tucked under his arm. He's too short for his age, Mikey. Starlene can't even see him over the counter.

“If you want me to do this for you,” I say, “why don’t you play it straight with me? Your name’s not Starlene.”

“There’s not a kid in America who still uses a tape recorder.”

This hurts, because my boy is a lie I’ve spent a lot of thought on. My first attempt started too old, seventeen already, went off to college and never visited, so I scratched him and dreamed up Mikey. I’ve even considered getting his first word across my bicep. DAD.

Ted laughed when I suggested that.

“What’re you, gay?”

“Dad?”

“Mom’s one thing. Mom’s, classic, but Dad? Dad’s for fags.”

“Not my dad, man. My son’s.”

Ted didn’t bother saying *You don’t have a son*, because it’s possible he has imaginary sons of his own. Our boys probably don’t play, but they have an understanding: Ted’s kid looks after mine out the corner of his eye, so Mikey can ace science, fail gym, and still have friends. This makes me a little grateful to Ted. Mikey likes hearing my stories, thinks it’s funny Ma used a big calculator and a handwritten calendar to work the bills. He even gets Jacob to come over sometimes, pretending to confuse us, and for the first time it makes Jay happy, somebody tugging his shirt. (Jay’s wife got the house even, I hear. A worse deal than Ted.) Then after Jay leaves, Mikey tells me, *You know, Dad, actually, you two don’t look alike at all.*

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Starlene reaches into the back pocket of her jeans and withdraws a wad of cash. “How much? I’d rather pay up front.” I stare at the bills, too many for a girl like her to carry in a city like this. She grins. “Make sure you can’t back out.”

“Five hundred,” I say, an absurd sum for a request so quick and thoughtless. She’ll be too smart for it. Mikey would understand what I’m after—he’s a whip with math—but he’d tell me there are easier ways to get out of this job. I’d tell him to watch how it’s done.

“Seventy-five,” Starlene says.

“Jews don’t get tattoos,” I say, intending to impress her, though really it’s my job to tell Ted where not to advertise: *The Daily Kvetch* is not the place: no burial for the inked.

“We do if we’re planning to be cremated,” she says. She makes a little *whooshing* sound with her lips, a spin in the air with her index finger. “Right out the chimney.”

“Listen,” I say, “here’s the big secret: people don’t end up with the tattoos they think they’re getting. They think they’re paying for a word, or a symbol or joke, but all they buy is a memory of who they were the moment they sat in my chair.”

And who I was, I don’t say.

“Convince me that a girl like you wants to remember a thing like this,” I say—meaning the photograph, sure, but also maybe this leaking storefront and my old three-legged stool and our stalemate back-and-forth—“and I’ll do it. For nothing. Swear to David Simon Himself.”

Starlene makes a sound like she’s inhaling deeply, but her breasts barely rise. (I check.) “I

don't have to tell you jack," she says.

The upstairs toilet flushes, and a minute later Ted's walking down the stairs, short wet beard and long wet hairs basically indistinguishable. When he sees Starlene he streaks his palm across his tongue and slicks back his scraggly hair, a movie move I keep on thinking shouldn't work.

"How can we help you, babe?" he says.

Starlene giggles, but she goes low-pitched again. "I'm all set here."

Ted looks me up and down, sees her cash still in her hand and me sitting back on the stool behind the counter, no open books, no pricing ledger, no register fiddling, no stencils. He sighs like this is the most typical incompetence he's ever seen, the bastard. "Ian, take your break." Ted squints at the sun through the barely-cracked blinds as he slinks off the bottom stair. "I'm sorry about that," he says, laying a hand on Starlene's shoulder. "He does have his good days, believe it or not."

I'm near boiling, but the sorry truth is I'd be happy to give Ted this job. Let him play Hitler, go right ahead, in the meantime I'll Yelp his barbarism to the world wide web—but Starlene says, "Ian's helping me just fine."

The way she says my name, man. All vowel. All glide.

"Does he even know what you want?"

"I don't want to be the one to draw—" I start.

"Ian's been haggling me up on a skull and crossbones," says Starlene. "Great businessman you've got. Taking a real hard line." Starlene shrugs Ted's hand off her shoulder. "I want the

skull all white and shiny, Ian." She sends Ted a smile that goes straight to his receding hairline. "Bald."

STARLENE, maybe. Mikey's first word.

Ted shakes two cigarettes from a half-empty pack on the counter and heads past me to the door. At the knob he pauses, turns sneering to catch my eye, but Starlene steps casually between us under the dripping ceiling and for the first time I don't even look up.

When the door shuts behind him, Starlene says, "I'd quit. If I were you, I'd honestly quit."

"I wouldn't get hired anywhere else."

"You're that bad?"

I shake my head. "I'm bare." The door bounces a few times in the wind, so I jiggle the knob twice to the left, then slam it shut. My arms look very white. I hold them out to Starlene, to show her. She takes my forearm in her hands, turning it over like the page of a book. A blank book. Her fingers are freezing.

"Hey," I say. I crouch to the parlor floor, all dust and dead fruitflies and muddy shoeprints, somebody needs to sweep. Me, I guess. "You dropped your picture."

The photo's upside down. I pick it up by its sides and wipe its face on the stomach of my cotton tee-shirt, trying to figure out which skinned-over skeleton looks most like Starlene. Jay and I are tracing-paper copies of Ma's family, all high hunched shoulders, but neither woman here has one eye smaller than the other.

"I feel bad for them," I say.

“No, you don’t.”

Starlene crouches next to me, then props my chin on her fist so I’m staring at her. She’s got a white scar above her lip. Her smaller eye squints. “No tears,” she says.

She drops my chin. I stare hard at a burn mark in the wood floor, waiting for Starlene to follow Ted out into the rain along Light Street, knowing that somehow I screwed up, I disappointed her. And she’d been so sure about picking me, too. Already it feels nice, that thing she said: *You’re the guy I want*. Already I miss that.

“Do you know where your family was,” Starlene says, “in the war?”

She’s still here, on my muddy floor under my straining roof, here with her picture of two skeletons holding hands. I know I have to think hard, answer right, to keep her with me: Ma grew up six miles south of Black and White, in the County, but I never thought to ask about her parents. When Grammy was alive, her accent was just Maryland. Lean and nasal. She liked to talk about landscaping.

“They’re on the edge,” Starlene says, contemplating her photo, not waiting any longer for my answer, “those two, about to tip into dead history. I still feel their pulse. You don’t.”

I wonder if Jay knows where Ma’s from. I get a sudden jealous spike for Ted, thirty-eight years old and his mom still dustbusting our curtains.

“I want to make you feel it,” says Starlene.

“You want to make me feel like a Nazi?”

That stops her.

“What did I ever do to you, Starlene?” I’ve

got a sadness welling up in me like a backed-up pipe and a sting in my eyes, stupid close to crying now. I want Starlene to say *Nothing, Ian, you’ve been nothing but good to me, to everyone*—but she doesn’t say anything. “Why do you want to make me feel like a bad person?”

Then Mikey’s standing beside me, padding out from behind the counter in socks, holding his place two-thirds through *Great Expectations* with one hand and patting my back with the other. I know he probably needs dinner, he probably needs a tissue or a ride to chess practice, but I just let him pat me. I let it feel nice. His sweater’s buttoned crooked, the striped pattern off-center, nothing aligning the way it should.

“Does it hurt?”

Starlene’s voice is just a bit of breath, and not a tough bit. Kind of scared, like Mikey’s sometimes is late at night when he and I both wake from our nightmares. Sometimes in the morning, after nightmare nights, he’s too sleepy to put his clothes on straight; he fills in his times tables at my bathroom sink as if the easy answers will sooth his fears. Four times five. Ten times two. Number after number.

“Nah,” I tell Starlene, because that’s what I tell Mikey, those nights when he’s so sad. “It’s nothing. Little spider bites. Much worse in your head.”

“Really?”

“Honestly?” Nobody ever says no, lie to me. The pipes groan in the ceiling, protesting the

rain. “Yeah,” I say. “I’ve heard it hurts.”

I want to snatch that fear right off her face and hold it forever, so she can’t have it back, and that’s the moment I feel so good, so necessary, so much like Christ Himself that I get the idea: “Starlene,” I say, “if you’re really scared, I mean. Maybe we could do it together. I’ll get one too. The next number up.”

One side of her mouth twists weirdly. “You know who had 53023?” she says. “In the camp?”

Oh, goddamn. As soon as I said it I knew the idea sounded dumb, like my cheap ticket to a new job and not my way to protect her. I’m expecting some horror story—Grandma Sho’s mother, shot through the neck in front of Sho and incinerated directly into her nostrils, the smell so strong her granddaughter sometimes coughs because she’s caught a whiff—but Starlene says, “Her lover.”

She looks at me with these uneven low-lit eyes. Sexy. I wonder if she’s lying.

I say, “So should I do it?”

Starlene lays her cold hand in my palm and says, “My grandma never wanted her lover to get tattooed.”

My heart plugs in to some new current, higher voltage.

I fire up the gun. I pop the cap on a black Sharpie and write the numbers on the whitest skin of Starlene’s arm, midway between elbow and wrist. Already I can imagine what it will be like to love that arm, to thread it wrongways through the sleeves of my own jacket in the cold. My hand shakes on the 2; the number winds up

with a curled little tail. We both laugh, nervously.

“It’s okay,” Starlene says. “I trust you. Keep going.” I flatten the base of the 2. I switch on the overhead lamp.

I take a deep breath.

“Ready?” I say.

She nods. At the last minute, she stands up and closes the blinds over the front door’s window. I stare pointedly at the deadbolt until she understands: lock it. I don’t want Ted to watch this.

Starlene and I look at each other grimly. One eye is wide as a quarter. She sits on the stool and extends her arm. I lean over her, needle poised, but then I pause.

“Go upstairs,” I tell Mikey, quietly, without turning around. “You shouldn’t see this.”

I don’t hear the patter of his feet on the floor. I crane my neck: Mikey smiles at me sweetly, sitting cross-legged before the door, but shakes his head.

“Go on,” I say. “Get out.”

Mikey cocks his head and arches an eyebrow. He stays put.

“Look at me,” Starlene says. “Forget the door. Ted’ll get a Natty Bo next door.”

I try to ignore Mikey as I bring the needle toward her flesh. I hover over the first number, the 5. The Sharpie has bled black into the tiny cracks in her sand-colored skin. At the wrist her veins are blue, but at the crook of her elbow they’re purple and thin as a toothpick. My hand shakes in the air.

With a shuffle of sweater and skin, Mikey

stands and walks steadily to my side. I can't believe the kid, refusing to disappear at a time like this. I need to concentrate. "Not now," I hiss, about ready to slap him one, but he rolls up his woolen sleeve and lays his little boy's arm directly atop Starlene's.

Mikey's arm is translucent: I can see the numbers right through it, the unnatural thickness supporting the 2.

"Go on, Dad," he says.

"Now?" I say. "Already?" Mikey nods, still offering his immaculate arm.

Brave boy. My lovely little canvas.

The needle digs into his skin with a hissing noise. He flinches at a pain I've never experienced. I keep my eyes trained on the needle, the in-and-out, the blood beading up on top of each black line. Starlene's fist clenches. Mikey doesn't make a sound, but behind him, on top of the pounding of the needle, Starlene starts speaking.

"That's exactly right, Ian," she says. "Keep it up." I guide the needle along the numbers. I trace every millimeter of every line. "You're doing good, Ian," says Starlene. "You're good, Ian. You're good." 