



## Removing a Tattoo

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Late Friday afternoon, Patsy sits at her desk in Sacred Heart Academy; through the open window she inhales the scent of lilacs as it wafts into the classroom on the wave of a warm breeze. She listens intently for the purr of a motor that will make a thrill run through her body. In just ten minutes she'll dash out the door, tear down the stairs, and run to his car. Her index finger traces the rough-cut black ink lines carved into the desktop, a heart with two sets of initials that have long collected dust, but she imagines that they are her's and Danny's initials.

The telltale sounds, the cough, sputter and rumble of his rebuilt 1937 Ford Roadster let Patsy know that he has arrived and is parked on the street below. All her friend's pony-tailed heads turn to the window. Whispers and giggles. Patsy loves it when her friends tell her that Danny is handsome as all get out, a real catch.

Sister Mary Theresa strides to the window rosary beads clicking, her long black garb undulating. Only the tips of her shoes are visible and she appears to float. Patsy loves math, physics and chemistry, the subjects that Sister teaches, but that's not all she teaches. She talks to the girls about necking and petting, which of course are forbidden. During such discussions Patsy notices how all the girls are so alert, hanging on her every word.

Quietly closing the window, Sister turns to Patsy. "From now on, your 'friend' will pick you up further down the street because these girls are incapable of concentrating when they hear an idling car."

An outburst of giggling from the girls.

"Yes Sister," says Patsy. As the bell rings and the young ladies clamber for the door, Sister opens the window again and says, "Not so fast Miss Patricia. I'd like a word with you."

Patsy hesitates, heaves a sigh. Surely it's not about Danny's car. Quickly she smiles, "Yes, Sister," and glances towards the window.

"Oh, never mind him. He'll wait for you if he's serious — a good Catholic boy."

Patsy isn't going to wait. What's Sister talking about?

"Sit down. What are your plans after you graduate?"

When Patsy looks at Sister's pale glowing skin the only word that comes to mind is 'pure,' and this makes her think of Danny's blemish-free face, and how lucky they both are to be free of pimples. "I'm not entirely sure, Sister." The fragrance of Maydays drift in the window this time and she squirms in her seat. She loves his blond hair, the wave that relaxes across his forehead.

"If you're going to university, you have to decide what you want to take."

University. She'd never given it a second thought. She'd only thought of marriage, but she knows what Sister wants to hear and says, "I thought I might go to teacher's college or take nursing."

Sister tilts her neck as if irritated or perhaps she's adjusting her confining habit. "Don't waste yourself on teachers' college. You have so much potential in the sciences. Why don't you apply to engineering?"

Engineering! Now that was way out there, but it's true that she enjoys lab experiments and the scientific questions that need solving, but so what? Does this mean that she should be an engineer?

Freed from Sister's clutches, Patsy runs straight down the stairs and into the sunshine, dumps her books into the back seat of Danny's car and hops in. He looks at her, a question on his face.

"Sister kept me."

"Uh huh."

"She thinks I should go to university."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Will you? What for?"

"I don't know." Opening her purse, she takes out her compact, pats the shine from her nose with the powder puff and strips off the pink angora sweater that drapes her shoulders over the standard uniform: a white blouse, navy jumper, bobby-sox and black and white oxfords. She swings her crossed leg up and down. She sees Danny glance down at what she knows are her finely shaped legs. Speeding off, window open, the wind loosens wisps of blonde almost white hair from her pony tail.

"Car's idling really rough. D'ya mind if we go see Hank?"

She shakes her head.

In Hanks's weedy back yard the two young men peer into the engine compartment and bow over the altar to the god of engines while Patsy sits in the car filing her nails.

Earlier, Sister had waxed eloquently on the engineering theme: "Miss Isobel Daw graduated in mechanical from our university in 1946. Two years ago already. Miss Elizabeth Lepine, who attended Sacred Heart Academy, will graduate in chemical this year, God willing. Think about it, Patricia. Here's the university calendar. Apply soon."

Finished with her filing, Patsy gazes at Danny's textbooks laying on the seat. She wants to see something again. Danny and Hank are still absorbed in the engine compartment and she surreptitiously opens one of his textbooks to the first page where the drawing of a cross glares at her, sinister and dark. The vertical and horizontal arms of the cross extend to the same length. Each arm narrows where the four arms intersect and then curves to widen at the outer extremities which look sharp, scythe-like. Black ink has saturated the paper inside the cross. Right in the library where they often do homework together, she has seen him bend over his textbooks inking in the crosses. He must spend hours and hours at it. She gapes at the cross and a little shiver scuttles down her back. Danny slams the hood and she snaps the book shut.

He climbs into the car. "Loose spark plug wire. Wanna get some Coke and chips?"

"Love to."

On the way, they stop for a red light. A young lady on the sidewalk at a bus stop right beside them bends over, her book bag on the grass next to her. Spittle winds its way from her mouth to the ground.

"We should help her," Patsy says.

"She's puking."

"C'mon, Danny, please pull up over there. I want to help her."

Thirty seconds later Patsy stands beside the girl. "Can we help?" On the sidewalk, bits of tomato peel stink in a frothy pink ooze. Patsy finds some tissues in the pocket of her jumper and hands them to the girl who wipes her mouth, and tries to clean up the front of her blouse and her book bag.

"I missed my bus," the girl says.

"Can we give you a ride, then?"

"I'd really appreciate that."

Danny has retrieved her bag.

They drive her home and as she gets out of the car, she says, "Gosh, you guys are so kind."

"Hey, no problem," Patsy says.

As they drive away Patsy says, "Boy, that feels good."

She glances at Danny's expression of surprise. "Don't you like helping out?" she says.

"I like to help guys with their cars."

Patsy laughs.

The following week, Sister asks Patsy to stay again after class.

"But a degree would take three years or longer. What about marriage and a family? I think my mom and dad expect —" Patsy says.

“Yes, of course those are important, but do you really want to tie yourself down at such a young age? You should get a good education, be employable.”

Patsy wonders why. Danny will earn the money and she'll be a mother at home. ‘Tying herself down,’ — another of Sister’s incomprehensible phrases. Danny’s mother and hers talk about having a hope chest with all the items she’ll need to fix up a home: doilies, embroidered linens, monogrammed slip covers for pillows. As a wife and mother she’ll cook tasty meals that will be ready for Danny when he gets home from work, keep the house clean, look after the children and involve herself in volunteer work, like the Catholic Women’s League. What’s wrong with this picture? Nothing.

On Saturday, she and Danny sit at the big table in the library doing their homework. Danny’s math text book lies open revealing the cross on the first page. Patsy stares at it, knows he’s in ROTC, has learned to make beds and polish shoes, to groom himself meticulously, to march, to handle and shoot guns. She leans towards him and whispers, “Danny, how did you draw this cross in every book?”

His eyes light up, he reaches into his book bag and takes out an envelope from which he carefully extracts a template of the cross which he hands to her. It’s made of stiff, glossy cardboard. “I trace around this and then ink it in.”

“Oh.” She turns it over carefully. “So, what does it stand for?”

“It’s the Iron Cross, given as a military decoration and goes way back to 1219. It’s awarded for bravery.”

She gazes at him steadily. “How come you put *this particular* cross in all your books?”

“I like it.”

She frowns.

“You know I want to be a pilot in the air force.” She does know and has seen the book, *The Fly Boys of World War II*, in his bag. She forgets her questions and his answers when he looks at her the way he does now.

For weeks Patsy anticipates the The Tri-Service Ball. Her mother has sewn a strapless full-length crinolined gown with a modest lace bolero. When Danny comes to pick her up for the ball, he seems almost spellbound. “You look beautiful!”

“Thanks,” she says shyly and finds him devilishly handsome in his grey dress uniform. When they arrive at the Legion Hall, she sees that Danny doesn’t look as dashing as the officers with their black pants and red stripe down the side, their red jackets, black bow ties, and some of them have an array of sparkling disks hanging on striped ribbons, but then he isn’t an officer yet. She also notes that the officers seem to favour Danny and there are no shortage of glances her way, either. Several higher-ups engage her in conversation even when Danny is chatting elsewhere in the hall and she realizes that she’s smart enough to carry on an intelligent conversation even with such elevated company. She’s been an asset to him and she feels proud of her accomplishment.

During the last dance, Danny holds her close. The band is playing Dean Martin’s “Memories are Made of This.” He bends, kisses her neck, and shivers go down her back.

Later that night in the car, he leans quickly towards her, “Oh, Patsy. I’m so crazy about you.” He shifts closer to her on the bench seat and kisses her neck, her face, her arms. They kiss. His hands reach down the top of her gown to fondle her breasts. They embrace wildly. Then he fiddles with the zipper at the back of her dress where each segment emits a click leading to where she wants to go so very badly.

She pulls away breathing heavily. “Danny, I’m crazy about you, but please, no.”

“Gees, Patsy!” He’s breathing hard.”

“Not here, like this, in a car.”

“I thought we’d do it tonight.”

“I want our first time to be special.”

“This will be special. Our parents expect us to marry, you know.”

“I know.”

He embraces her, kisses her, then runs his hand up under her dress.

“Danny, I said no.”

He abruptly pulls back from her and slams his fist on the dashboard. She blinks and involuntarily jerks. Inside her, everything is badly jangled. Already out the door, he slams it shut. As she sits in silence her heart beating and hands trembling she sees a flame briefly flicker — a cigarette. He's standing at the front of the car, puffing away. She's never seen behaviour like this from him before. Maybe she'll lose him. Maybe it's over. How does she patch this up? Is she being unreasonable? She opens the car door, steps out, and walks slowly around to the front of the car.

He doesn't look at her. "All the guys are doing it," he says — a pause — "well, they all *talk* about doing it, *say* they're doing it." He reaches the pack of cigarettes over to her without turning to her. She takes one and then he turns to light it for her. She keeps her smoking a secret from her parents, tells them what they want to hear, keeps his Iron Cross a secret. Well, what is there to tell? He flicks the little black wheel of the lighter. A flame jumps to life in the dark. He's still annoyed.

"The nuns say it's a sin before marriage," she says.

"Nuns. What do they know?" But he seems calmer.

They smoke in silence.

Patsy's mind jumps to her homemaker sister, Joanie's kitchen where Patsy had visited recently. Flaxen-haired Ella screamed in her high chair, Joanie spooned puréed chicken and carrots into her child's mouth. When Joanie stopped to talk to Patricia, Ella emitted a piercing scream. Like a busy airport, Joanie glided spoon after spoon for a landing into Ella's mouth. Finally, after umpteen spoonfuls, Ella turned her head. She'd had enough, squirmed and fussed when her face was washed and her hands wiped. She kicked to get down, then climbed onto Patsy's lap where she pulled Patsy's hair and poked her eye. Her adorable niece, whom she really did love who was also cranky, snotty-nosed and annoying.

She says, "It's just that I think I have plans. Maybe I'll go into engineering."

"Engineering. Have you lost your mind? That's for guys."

"It doesn't have to be. Sister told me about all these girls from the Academy who've graduated from engineering."

He shrugs. Exhales smoke. "You'll never be accepted — by the guys."

"Well, maybe I won't go into engineering, but I want to do something."

A long silence.

"What's wrong with being a mother and staying home like all the other girls? We should get married. Soon. Whaddya think?"

"I don't know, Danny." She wants to get what's worrying her off her chest. "About your Iron Cross." She tries to make her voice sound casual.

"What about it?" He pulls himself upright.

"I looked it up. It's the symbol of the German Armed Forces."

"So?"

"Nothing. Just it's strange."

"It looks good, that's all. Besides, why do we have to talk about this tonight?"

"We don't." She moves closer and leans her head against his arm. "Don't be mad at me, Danny. Please."

He puts his arm around her.

In July the hot days roll on and on, one sizzling into the next and at the Riverside Pool, they swim beneath each other's legs, do hand stands, and swim races. After the water fun, they buy hot dogs at the food stand, load on the catsup, mustard, onions and relish, and spread out their towels on the grass.

"I love lying beside you with the sun beating down. This is exactly what the 'Lazy Hazy Crazy Days of Summer' are all about."

"How would you like to lie beside me in a dark hotel room? That would be special."

"Danny!" She gives him a punch, connects with the stone solid bicep and he feigns pain. She rolls onto her stomach, listens to the exuberant poolside din and feels herself drifting off.

That evening, at Patsy's vanity table, her mother is about to rub cream on her sunburnt back. "What's this?" her mother asks.

"What's what?"

“This. Look in the mirror.” Her mother gives Patsy the hand held mirror and she turns to look at her back in the big mirror. On her shoulder blade a patch of white skin jumps out against the sunburn. It’s in the shape of the Iron Cross. She gasps, then tries to make her gasp into a cough.

“That looks like some kind of cross to me,” her mother says. “I’ve seen it before. Recently. Yes. Doesn’t Danny have that cross in his textbooks?”

“It’s just a joke.”

“Listen, I went through a war —”

“It’s no big deal. He just likes the look of it.”

“Really! Why, I wonder? And, how did it get on *you*?”

“He has a template of this cross and he must have laid it on my back at the pool. I fell asleep, remember? Must be his stamp of approval.” She forces a strained laugh.

“More like you’re one of his text books. A possession. You be careful young lady, with that boy of yours.”

“Oh, Mom, it’s nothing.” But she breaks out in a cold sweat. Must be the sunburn.

Sleep eludes Patsy. Her memory keeps flashing white skin surrounded by red skin. Two words haunt her: branded and owned. Danny is free. He knows what he’ll do, how he’ll serve. For once her dreamy thoughts and feelings of him are replaced with disappointment and the disturbing events after the ball. The Tri-Service Ball. A lovely romantic fairytale. That’s all.

She clicks on the night-table lamp and retrieves the university calendar from her bag. In bed, she skims through the engineering section, glances, reads descriptions. Then she flips to nursing, reads the entire section, re-reads the required courses and studies the practicum description. She sees herself in the spic and pan white uniform and cap taking temperatures, administering pills and being kind to her patients. A glimmer of something begins inside her, not the happiness society expects her to have about marriage and children, but how she felt the time she helped the sick girl at the bus stop.