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Tattoos and Chopsticks: My Mother and I

Claire Arneson

The one piece of advice my mom bestowed upon me growing up was: "Don't get a tattoo, or I won't pay for college." There was never any explanation. No long lecture on why tattoos were bad, and that if I got one, I was going to hell. Just the basic "Nope," "Absolutely not," and "I swear to God, Claire Marie." I grew up thinking I would never get one. I admired my mother so much and would never disobey her. As the teenage years came and the black clothing and black eyeshadow worked their way into my appearance, so did the "I HATE YOU MOM!" phase. So naturally, I did what any rebellious sixteen-year-old would do on Halloween night of 2018, I got a tattoo.

Not a tattoo at an actual parlor; I wasn't that much of a rebel. In reality, if that were to happen, I would have called my mom to pick me up. I actually got the tattoo in my friend's basement with a needle, a pencil, thread, and Indian ink. I knew this type of art as a "stick and poke," but some may call this a "prison tattoo"—my own father calls it a prison tattoo. I was not eager at first to disobey my mother, but the idea of being rebellious and possibly getting HPV *absolutely* convinced me to say yes. We decided that the tattoo we would get would be the Wiccan symbol for "blessings." I didn't choose this tattoo, but if I was digging my own grave, I might as well shovel in the dirt blindly.

We numbed the area first with ice. And as the cold water touched my skin, I still saw no consequences from this plan. The place I chose was the arch of my right foot. I thought this would be the most manageable area to hide from my family. We went one by one, the three of us sticking the needle (sticking *different* needles) into each other until the design was inked into our layers of skin. I went home that

night with a secret, a secret that could potentially end in life or death. (I was dramatic in my younger years). The next day, the tattoo resembled more of a paw print than I remembered it being. After looking up the actual symbol, I saw that this was not what the image was supposed to resemble. I was mad, but after a couple of months, I started loving it and wanted another tattoo.

That's right, another. If you thought my mom was going to rip me a new one before, now she would end up ripping me in half. My next tattoo was done, yet again, in my friend's basement. Her basement became our makeshift tattoo parlor; soon, we all were getting tiny tattoos. My second tattoo was a sun. I could pretend that it was for a sentimental reason. For example: "I had a dog named Doug who ran in the street and got hit by a car because the sun was in the driver's eyes." But I just thought it was cute. My third tattoo was a lotus flower. I mainly hated an old fling with my entire heart and thought I should get a provocative tattoo on my hip to feel sexy.

My little permanent doodles stayed hidden for months. The closest I ever got to them being discovered was when my dad asked me what one of them was. But I replied smoothly and told him it was a drawing I did. Everything was going excellent until I was out and about with my mom at the mall. But of course, I got a chill text from my friend, telling me that her parents found out about the tattoos. My heart dropped. I started sweating, and I could feel bile climb up my throat. I could see my grave being made, my gravestone already sculpted—right next to Doug's. But I replied calmly and thoughtfully.

Me: *WHAT?!? WTF DO YOU MEAN THEY FOUND OUT?*

Yeah. Not how I should have handled it, but come on. Then she told me that they didn't "find out" as such, but more that she—a blabbermouth—told them. And sure, it was because she was giving blood with her dad, and they asked if she had gotten a tattoo in the last year, but friendship is more important than tainted blood for sick people! Although I was scared, I remembered that at least it was just her

parents. My parents were still none the wiser, and her parents were kind, respectable people! So, it wasn't like her parents would tell mine.

Friend with a big mouth: *My mom is going to tell your parents later today. So I would tell them before they do.*

At that moment, I cursed Leanne and Dan. No wonder their daughter had a big mouth! She got it from them. Throughout this inner turmoil, I was still strolling the mall with my mom and aimlessly trying to figure out how I would tell her. Finally, I decided I'd do it when we sat down at a Chinese restaurant for lunch so she couldn't off me in public. Even though I wouldn't leave it past her to slip some poison into my food.

We sat down—don't worry, I waited till we ordered—and I put her hands in mine and said, "Mom, the light of my life, my inspiration—I got little tattoos with my friends, and I am so sorry. You were right."

She looked at me and said, "It's okay." And we went home happy and full of chicken lo mein.

I wish that was what happened.

In reality, we sat down, and then I quickly blurted out that I had tattoos. My mother started turning red, but she couldn't yell because we were in a public setting. Instead, she made me show her the ones on my feet. She said they were "stupid and ugly." She was outraged. I was waiting to hear my punishment. I was expecting it to be "No television for a month," or "I get to keep your phone for the rest of your life." Instead, when I asked, she said, "Excuse me." She signaled a waitress. "Can we get a few extra pairs of chopsticks?"

Her punishment derailed the typical and old ways. She decided I would have to eat with chopsticks for a whole week. No matter the meal, I had to use chopsticks. I had to eat my Cinnamon Toast Crunch with chopsticks, a terrible experience. She chose this because, and I quote, "It's stupid and pointless, like your tattoos." On the bright side, I am very good with chopsticks.

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Now the answer to the question you're probably waiting to hear is, did she help me pay for college? She did. Even though she had one rule for me to follow, my mother ended up helping me go to school. As the years went on, they became irrelevant.. They're just a part of me now, and even though she won't ever say it, I think she likes them too. Ha, no, she hates all of them, but she doesn't hate me.

***Claire Arneson** is an English major and a communications minor, who is also pursuing a certificate in writing and editing here at UND. She is set to graduate in the fall of 2023 and hopes to work either as a literary agent, editor, or anything in publishing. She works at the library as a research consultant and at the newspaper as a section editor. When she isn't working, she can be found reading all the books she can, writing in a local coffee shop, or screaming her lungs out at a hockey game.*