

Tattoo

“Awesome,” Amber exclaimed, as she leaned over the bed to study Sharlene’s left ankle. Her friend had phoned her to come over to view something extraordinary. It turned out to be a tattoo.

Amber examined the image, as she sat on a fluffy rug by the side of the bed upon which Sharlene was lolling against the headboard. Her friend was propped up by a small mountain of pillows and cushions. One of her arms was curled around a large teddy bear, a mascot she had been given in childhood and to which she still clung at odd times and upon going to sleep. Textbooks, notebooks and coloured marking pens were scattered chaotically on the bed.

The room was cluttered with the usual mementoes of adolescence -- posters of movie actors and rock stars, college pennants from ex-boyfriends, photographs attached haphazardly to the frame of a large dressing mirror, each marking a different stage in the confusing journey through adolescence and secondary school.

“When did you get it done?”

“Friday evening.”

Amber studied the tattoo again. It was of a ferocious lizard, greenish-black and about six inches long, with an intimidating forked tongue. The creature was repulsive. It sent a shiver through her. It definitely detracted from the shapeliness of the leg. She couldn’t fathom why any sensible girl would want such an ugly thing etched on her ankle.

“You like it?” Sharlene asked, lifting her leg to better display the lizard. Her periwinkle eyes sparkled in expectation of a ringing endorsement. “Mom thinks it’s horrible,” she added.

“It’s quite impressive. Rather unusual though,” Amber ventured tentatively. “Why a lizard?”

Sharlene hugged her teddy bear more closely. “Because it’s mean-looking. Reminds me of the sticky fingers forever crawling up my

leg,” she replied, with a raucous laugh. “You should get a tattoo too.”

“My aunt won’t approve.”

“Do you always have to do what your aunt wants? Get with it. Be daring for a change.”

That implied criticism annoyed Amber. “Not the time to upset my aunt,” she countered tersely. “She’s going to finance my escape to L.A. Remember?”

Sharlene shrugged.

Both girls were dressed in T-shirts and pedal-pushers. Amber’s shirt was in pastel pink displaying the words “Glamour Girl” surrounded by an oblong border, which resembled a Broadway hoarding fringed with lights. Sharlene’s was white, but with a much more provocative message. It featured a pair of outward-facing hands, positioned just where her bust was, as if warding off an indecent assault. A printed injunction above the motif declared: “Hands Off!”

The conversation lapsed. Of late, the silences between the two friends had taken on a vaguely competitive edge, as if their relationship had shifted subtly away from the original one of mentor and disciple.

During that silence, Amber’s mind dwelled upon her reservations over tattoos. History lessons had taught her that ancient Egyptians and Romans tattooed slaves and criminals to identify them. The Church had condemned the practice in the Middle Ages. It had faded thereafter. Though tattooing seemed to be reviving as a modern fashion statement, it did not appeal to her. She had no wish for her smooth olive-coloured skin to be marked.

Many of her fellow students, however, had been following the fad. A few had hearts and the names of boy or girl friends etched on their limbs or bodies. One Australian girl had actually gone so far as to have the words “This ass belongs to Billy” tattooed across a part of her buttocks

normally seen only by a lover.

To Amber such a reckless declaration reduced the girl to a mere chattel. She herself would never agree to become anybody's property, let alone be branded as one. She wondered how that classmate would react if, whoever Billy was, shifted his affections elsewhere. Would she then have to find herself another boy with the same name?

Notwithstanding that Sharlene's tattoo was non-specific, it seemed odd that her friend should have had it done so suddenly, right before finals. She asked why, breaking their silence.

"Pissed off, I guess," Sharlene answered, toying with the ears of the teddy bear. "Got bored with hitting the books and Mom kept nagging me about making the grades for Vassar."

"You've been getting good grades. You should make Vassar easily. Is that the college of your choice?"

"Not mine. Mom's. Vassar's her old alma mater."

"You mean you had thought of going elsewhere?"

"Sure, some place more hip and less tight-assed. New Orleans or San Francisco, maybe."

"Frisco'll be great! We'll be able to meet more easily."

"No way that's going to happen," Sharlene said, pulling a face. "Not part of Mom's grand design. She thinks Vassar's the place to hook someone from the Ivy League, some guy smart enough to head a Forbes 500."

"But your dad isn't working for a Forbes 500."

"That's the trouble. We wouldn't be able to afford this flat if we weren't subsidized by the American taxpayer. Mom doesn't want me to make the same mistake."

"People are supposed to marry for love, aren't they?"

"Love, slove, stuff. That's what they say. But, according to

Mom, love's just for fairy tales. She figures marriage's a business. You do a deal, you strike a bargain. A gal's got to get something tangible out of it if she has got to put up with snoring, bad breath, cold feet, child-bearing and other assorted discomforts. In the event of a divorce, she should at least be guaranteed a decent settlement."

"Good Lord, how depressing! Surely love's got to come in somewhere?"

"Mom says love's too heady an emotion to endure. It's like being high on champagne, or half-stoned on coke. Nobody can keep feeling like that all the time."

"You can say that again! I'm not sure getting stoned is all that great though. I'm still feeling terrible now about that party! Made a complete ass of myself."

Sharlene broke out with another peel of raucous laughter. "You were fantastic, girl! You danced as if you were hot and dying to be laid."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Come on, baby, didn't you feel good letting everything hang out? Admit it! It felt good, didn't it?"

"Shut up, I said!"

Sharlene chuckled some more. After a pause, she added: "You know, it's crazy that a girl can't even count on decent sex after marriage. According to Kinsey, the average American male is good for only two and a half minutes! Pathetic! Not good enough even to get an average girl warmed up."

"Where do you get all this stuff?"

"Reading and field research, darling," Sharlene said. Then, in a more subdued tone, she continued: "I've enjoyed champagne, drugs and sex. But none of that is love, is it? They all seem to leave you a little empty afterwards."

Amber nodded her head in sympathy. “I don’t think I’ve ever been in love,” she said wistfully. “The poets tell us it’s supposed to be a ‘divine madness’ but I’ve never felt it.”

“Me neither,” Sharlene declared. “What a couple of losers we are! Two great beauties and not a man to love between them. Enough to make a girl cry.”

Sharlene’s admission disappointed Amber. She had been half-hoping that her friend would one day unravel the mysteries of love for her. But all she had been getting were statistics.

The American reached over to a bedside table and opened a drawer. “Hey, want a joint?”

“Your parents allow you to smoke at home?”

“Sure, why not? So long as I don’t go overboard. They smoke too. They sniff coke as well, although I’m not supposed to know that. When they go partying, their crowd all sniff coke. My Dad often carries some in his pocket, just in case.”

“Golly.”

“Well, how about it?” Sharlene asked, holding out a joint.

Amber politely declined. “I’ve caused enough upset the last time. Isn’t your dad scared of being caught?”

“That’s the beauty of being a diplomat. You can screw up big time and still get diplomatic immunity.”

Sharlene looked at the smoke and put it back. She then rummaged in her drawer and held up a packet of Spearmint. “How about some gum then?” she asked.

Amber declined again.

Sharlene peeled off the foil of a stick and pushed it into her mouth. As she chewed, she crumbled the wrapping and, with a deft flick of her wrist, tossed it into a waste basket at a corner of the room.

“Bravo!” Amber said.

Her friend inclined her head to acknowledge the acclaim.

How funny human beings were, Amber thought, as she watched her neighbour masticating away. When she was at Sister Magdalene’s, gum-chewing was forbidden. It had been the same at home in Yaumati. She used to resent those restrictions. After moving to Bowen Road, she was allowed to chew to her heart’s content. She had exercised that freedom for a while but one day at school, she noticed a bunch of girls chewing. When she got home, she stood in front of the bathroom mirror and chewed some gum. The movements of her mouth and jaw did her no favours. From that moment on she gave it up.

Perhaps her uncle was right. He had argued that freedom was a paradox. True freedom lay in refraining from exercising it. Her uncle was often obscure, and sometimes rather acerbic, but occasionally his words jolted her into a fresh line of thinking.

Suddenly, she recalled a remark her uncle had made. “Hey, your dad doesn’t work for the CIA, does he?” she blurted out.

“Where the hell’s that coming from, all of a sudden?”

Sharlene’s brow puckered and her periwinkle eyes widened in surprise.

“My uncle hinted at that possibility recently. He said Hong Kong had the largest American consulate in the world. Half the staff had to be CIA agents or China-watchers, masquerading as diplomats.”

“Hmmm. Come to think of it, the consulate is pretty big.”

Sharlene paused reflectively, as she smoothed the fur on her bear. Then she added: “Dad’s in the Economic Section. He’s supposed to be collecting and analysing statistics from China. GDP figures, steel production, electricity consumption and boring stuff like that. Hardly what CIA spooks are supposed to do, at least according to the movies.”

“All I know about the CIA also comes from movies,” Amber

offered. “But I also know that China considers all its national statistics to be state secrets. Digging them out could be considered spying, whether done by the CIA or anyone else.”

“I suppose that’s a way of looking at it. God, how does any girl know what her father does these days, especially when he’s working for the Federal Government?”

Sharlene hesitated a moment before adding: “I’ll let you into a secret. My Dad made a few cracks about your uncle too.”

“Really? What?”

“Thinks your uncle’s a subversive. Suggested I shouldn’t be so thick with you.”

Amber reacted as if poked by a sharp instrument. “What the hell does that mean?” she cried. “Why haven’t you told me this before?”

“Hey, relax, sweetie. Don’t take it to heart. We’re buddies and nothing’s going to change that. Dad doesn’t always mean what he says. He sometimes gets a bit up-tight, especially when things are not going well at the office. I never pay much attention to what my parents say anyway.”

But Amber was only partially mollified. “It’s embarrassing all the same. I feel like an idiot, coming here so often and taking his rides to school every day. Better start making my own way from now on.”

“Hey, come on! Cool down! School’ll be over soon and we’ll be going our separate ways. Let’s not ruin things. If we altered our routine, Dad’ll know I’ve spilled the beans and there’ll be a row.”

Amber saw the force in the argument but remained unappeased. She recalled the cheerful way Sharlene’s old man had greeted her each morning and the jokes he told during the journeys to school. The world was filled with hypocrisies, she thought bitterly. How could she tell if the faces people turned towards her were what they were supposed to be?

Still feeling aggrieved, she asked: “Why does your dad think

my uncle's a subversive?"

"Because he keeps writing anti-American articles in Chinese newspapers."

"My uncle's not anti-American, for heaven's sake. I've read his articles. He merely criticizes certain aspects of free enterprise and corporate capitalism, not America."

"From my dad's point of view, anybody who criticizes free enterprise and capitalism has to be a subversive."

"Hey! Wait a minute." Amber held up a hand, as if trying to gather her thoughts. "How does your dad know what my uncle has written? Your dad doesn't read Chinese. Also my uncle never attaches his real name to articles. Even I don't know which articles are his, unless he tells me, so as to get me to read them. So how does your dad know what my uncle has written?"

"Beats me. Maybe he does work for the CIA."

"An anti-American subversive isn't going to finance his niece to go study in America, is he?"

"Guess you've got a point," Sharlene conceded. "But there are also other black marks against your uncle. He's against the private ownership of cars, for a start. You've told me so. It beggars belief. He's about the only guy along our entire street who doesn't own a car. Cars represent freedom, don't they? Individuality, success, prosperity, the essence of the American way of life. A guy who refuses to own one has to be anti-American, don't you think?"

Amber gave an ironic laugh and brushed back a wisp of hair which had fallen across her forehead. "I'll tell you something. I used to hanker after a big red Cadillac convertible. Wanted to drive it around with its top down, with wind whistling through my hair. Wanted everybody to take notice of me. But I wouldn't really need a convertible, would I, if I

didn't want to show off?

“Take my aunt. She walks half a mile through the Botanical Garden each day to get to work. She's been doing that from way back. She thinks walking is doing her a power of good. People in China used to cycle everywhere. Now everybody wants to ride in a car. The roads get clogged and the environment is shot to hell, not to mention the rising death toll on the roads.”

“Yeah, that's a pity”

“My uncle says that in Pennsylvania there's an Amish community which lives without cars and electricity. It has no alcoholism or crime either. He thinks there are lessons to be learnt from such simpler lifestyles.”

“Must be hell of a dull place,” Sharlene interjected.

“Depends on what you mean by dull. That's a part of America my uncle has plenty of time for. So you can't dub him as anti-American.”

Amber was surprised to find herself defending her uncle with such persistence, particularly when she wasn't even sure she understood half his arguments. Nonetheless, having started, she pressed on.

“My uncle feels it's the constant advertising suggesting the desirability of car-ownership that's fuelling demand. It's like brain-washing in Communist states. If advertisements for cars were cut down, if governments developed better public transport, demand would fall. There would be fewer deaths on the roads, a less polluted environment and people would lead healthier lives.”

“Sweetie, don't forget you go to school in a car.”

“Yes, but I'm not adding to the problem because your dad's making that journey for you anyway.”

“You're beginning to sound like an old woman with this environmental thing. Sure, sexy ads sell cars. The older generations seem

to forget they used to be young once. Kids sometimes want to get into their cars not because they want to go from Point A to Point B. They do it to cruise around, just for the hell of it. They want to jump red lights, break the speed limit, see how fast they can go. It's the rush, the risk, the challenge of danger, the spice of being young and alive."

"If we want to live in an orderly society we have to consider the well-being of future generations," Amber said primly. "My uncle figures that half the cars in the world should be scrapped."

"Half the cars!" Sharlene's voice turned shrill from amazement. "Do you know what'll happen then? The world economy'll be on its knees, Wall Street in free fall. Virtually every major corporation depends on people buying more and more cars. Not just General Motors, but steel makers, oil producers, insurance underwriters, cement manufacturers, advertising firms, the whole shebang. It's consumption that makes for growth. Otherwise there'll be job losses, depression, soup kitchens, food riots. How can anybody want that to happen?"

"Of course nobody wants to see that happen."

"Your uncle apparently does."

"No, he doesn't."

"Sure as hell sounds like it."

"Cars are just a small part of the whole picture. Many industrial processes are based on burning a finite resource -- fossil fuel. When oil starts running out, economies will collapse and people will start fighting over what's left."

"Come on, stop scare-mongering! Oil will never run out. Prospectors are finding new fields all the time. And even if oil does run out, science and technology would have come up with alternatives long before then. That's how free enterprise and market forces operate. What's all this about, your batting for your uncle all of a sudden? Your uncle

saying this and saying that? You're not turning anti-American too, are you sweetie?"

"Don't be silly! You know me better than that."

Sharlene put on a look of exaggerated disbelief.

The inability to shake her friend's developing opinion of her uncle caused her to deploy a rash gambit. "If my uncle's really anti-American, he wouldn't still be in love with an American girl."

"What? Who? What girl?"

"Isabelle."

"Oh, you mean that girl in the painting in his study?" Sharlene waved a dismissive hand. "That happened ages ago, before either of us was even born."

"He's still in love with her."

"No kidding! How'd you know? You've never told me that."

"Well, I don't exactly know. I'm guessing. I've discovered he hides some photos of her in a box under his bed."

"Have you seen them?"

"No, but I'm dying to."

"Where's Isabelle now? Is she back in the States or in England? Do they still keep in touch?"

"No idea."

"You ninny! You should keep tabs on juicy titbits like that," Sharlene said. The American mulled the information for a moment and then added: "Hey, your uncle goes off to England for a few weeks every year, doesn't he? Do you suppose he goes to meet her?"

"No! Come off it! My uncle's not that kind of person."

"Hold on. Let's not dismiss the proposition out of hand! You don't know where Isabelle is, right?"

Amber nodded.

“You’ve got a suspicion, an intuition, right?”

Amber nodded again.

“Well, I saw a play once about two lovers who ended up marrying other people. But every year they would meet secretly for a few days at a location away from their respective towns. They would make love and tell each other about their spouses, their families, their joys and sorrows. Your uncle looks a pretty cool dude for a guy his age. Maybe he’s on the same game.”

Amber shook her head vigorously. “That’s impossible. He’s devoted to my aunt.”

“How innocent can you be? Who knows what men get up to outside their homes? Maybe I ought to make a pass at your uncle the next time I’m at your place. See if he nibbles.”

“Shar! Don’t you dare! He’s old enough to be your grandfather!”

“That’s the whole point!”

Sharlene sat up on the bed and leaned excitedly towards Amber. Her eyes lit up. “I’ve read a study which concluded that one of the most common fantasies bugging middle-aged men is to make it big with some teenage chick. I’d just be engaging in some social research. Besides, the last time I saw your uncle at your place, he gave me a strange look. So maybe he actually has the hots for me. Worth a try.”

Amber was appalled. “Try a stunt like that, Shar, and I’ll kill you!” she cried.

“O-o-h, look who’s getting all hot and bothered!” Sharlene teased, leaning even closer. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief and she made a taunting face. “Your uncle’s got money and he’s got brains. Sometimes a gal needs a guy who’s got more than just what’s between his legs. If your uncle nibbles, who knows where it can lead. I may end up

being your new aunt! Ha-ha-ha!”

Amber rose from the rug and, without warning, shoved Sharlene hard with both hands. The attack unbalanced Sharlene, sending her tumbling off the other side of the bed. But she jumped back on the bed at once and kept thumping Amber on the head with her teddy bear.

“Call me auntie! Call me auntie!” Sharlene taunted, laughing hysterically each time she landed a blow.

Amber in turn jumped onto the bed to fight for possession of the mascot.

“Gimme that! Gimme that!” Amber cried, laughing just as hysterically, with tears of fun trickling helplessly from her eyes. “You shameless hussy, I’m going to auntie you all right!”

They grappled with each other, pulling at each other’s clothes and limbs, squealing and laughing. They didn’t stop till both fell back exhausted, thoroughly out of breath.