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When I fully absorb the psychic's words, I become worried, as I picture Brandy relay to Emma information from the other side. Slandorous information. Watch out that bitch doesn't run you over, she's a terrible driver. Tips on how to manipulate me into giving copious amounts of dog biscuits. Be really good around Christmas, it's a great time for treats.

I wonder where Brandy resides. I assume she is in heaven - despite her mischievous behaviour she was a loyal, loving companion. Perhaps Brandy resides in a parallel universe - a squirrel hell, dog heaven.

After the psychic experience, I regard Emma in a different manner. Sometimes she rests her head on her paws as she looks off into space. Her eyes glaze over. She appears hypnotized by a tasty dog biscuit. I have seen this expression on her face before; however, I have never thought anything of it until the psychic visit. My feet move up to Emma. Her eyes are glassy, yet intent. "Hey Emma," I say. "How's my little doggy doing?" A look of annoyance is seen in her eyes as her gums grip back, exposing her teeth in an expression which indicates irritation. I touch her head and stroke her ears. Finally, she smiles a slight smile, as her one and a half inch tail wags back and forth, slowly.

## Stolen Identity

By Sarah Alban

I'm not listening to Dean Jones talk about tattoo cover-ups. That's because someone is behind him, wielding a needle:

"BZZZZZZZZZZZ"

Dean owns a tattoo parlor, something I haven't visited since getting an 18-year-old's first rebellious ink. The ominous vibration coming from behind him is crushing the silence in the room and paralyzing me with a familiar soundtrack:

"BZZZZZZZZZZZ." (Pause.) "BZZZZZZZZZZZ." (Pause.)  
"BZZZZZZZZZZZ."

The needle transports me back five years, to a black dentist's chair in the Chicago suburbs, where a tattoo artist peeled a purple stencil off the back of my neck, just below my hairline. As I gaped into double-mirrors at the placeholder, I watched all my job opportunities vaporize. I asked him to move the stencil lower, where no one could see it, before sinking the needle into me. He cleaned me off and lowered the transfer below my collar, though I ought to have recognized the implication of that decision then: Don't get a tattoo yet.

But if I'd been that wise, I wouldn't have this story.

Asking to lower the tattoo likely explains the shoddy workmanship I received. Artists want to showcase their work, after all. And I love my shoddily inked tattoo: a mounted black Sagittarius arching an arrow toward my left shoulder while a yellow star glimmers above its right-hand shoulder. The design opened itself to endless interpretations, so I could tell people the Sagittarius meant "Protection," or "Strength," or "Fighting evil," or "Hunting for wisdom," or any other improvisation on the archer theme that jumped from my mind to my lips. I typically ended with, "It's who I became when I turned 18."

That was a total lie. I didn't believe in astrology. I'd never read a horoscope that wasn't forced on me. That Sagittarius lived in nothingness. It existed less than nihilism does.

It sat on my neck to start conversations, and even that was pushing its purpose. I'd only wanted ink. And that ruse about identifying who I was? That stopped working in January 2011 anyway. Hold the flowers.

January 2011 brought news of a possibly reorganized zodiac, and for a while social-media and tattoo sites suggested astrological tattoos had been stripped of their meanings. A newspaper I had never heard of, the Minnesota Star Tribune, began popularizing the Internet with a report that the Western zodiac cycle was keeping alive skies long dead. The stars had for millennia (and longer) been realigning into modern seasonal schedules, the article said. In the tattooed community, those of us who had inked one of the 12 symbols onto our bodies blinked at the articles glowing on our screens. A lot.

The optimists asked, "What's my new sign?"

The pessimists asked, "Who am I now?"

The realists inhaled. They swallowed. They exhaled. They "Hm" and "mm" quietly. Finally they said, "Isn't that something?" and walked away from their computers.

I belonged to the third group, though I faced a particular challenge: "What do I do when a tattoo that meant nothing to me suddenly meant nothing to anyone else, either?"

By stripping my meaningless tattoo of meaning, I daresay someone's given it meaning.

A dermatologist can remove a tattoo by bursting its pigmentation into particles with a high-tech laser. After a few sessions, the tattoo dissipates. Some "after" shots look so clean that drawing a freckle on the unblemished skin is necessary to restore its humanity.

But that doesn't always work. Sometimes, though rarely, the skin melts and pinches into red-blemished valleys that resemble melted cheese. This hardly ever happens, but the images of what skin looks like when it does leech onto the brain once they've been Googled.

Back to Dean's buzzing parlor. "I hope that person," I thought, "really wants that tattoo."

My first tattoo had suffered a clumsy unveiling five years ago. I'd fished for explanations to the first question, "Why?" But a tattoo was so rare among my age group that most my friends responded to my stuttering by ignoring it and speeding to ask, "Did it hurt?"

"No," I said, this without stuttering. I didn't weep, wince, or whine getting it.

Some say getting a tattoo feels like being pinched. They leave out that it feels like being pinched ... and pinched and pinched and pinched. People who've gotten tattoo removals say that procedure feels like being slapped. I don't know what they're leaving out, but I suspect "being slapped and slapped and slapped and slapped" touches on what they mean. Knowing what "pinch" means would deter me from getting the "slaps" even if the laser-removal price tag hadn't first.

Dean's voice pulled me back.

"What are you thinking of covering it up with?" he asks.



"Don Quixote," I say.

Don Quixote is a fictional character known for his idealistic ambitions. But he's spindly.

Dean looks unhelpful and says, "Usually when we do a cover-up, we do something more—organic."

"Flowers?" I say.

"Yeah."

Flowers. The water of artwork. Subjects so cluttering canvases they hardly draw contemplation. So lush, lavish, and lively they put the brain to sleep. Flowers. Clichéd to the extent there's little to add about them you wouldn't already know. Well. My body has enough water.

"Thanks, Dean," I say. "I'll be in touch."

Light my fire.

I've left Dean for another tattoo artist. I couldn't stomach explaining why reducing my tattoo to flowers nauseated me, so I fled. In the new tattoo parlor, Dean's voice stuck in my head like an old lover's. When I open my eyes, needles have appeared in front of me. I could still hear the buzzing of Dean's parlor.

The tattoo artist transferred a purple stencil onto my back below my Sagittarius, and I did the double-mirror trick. This stencil outlined a hand, holding a match to the Sagittarius' feet. The match wasn't lit.

"That'll come later," this guy says. He looks trustworthy. Like someone's beaten him around the country a few times, so he knows not to dupe people. And my alternatives, getting laser-slapped or covered in flowers, frighten me. At least I'd already survived the pinches once.

In an hour, he'd lit the Sagittarius on fire. Next time an astrologist tries to tell me my tattoo means nothing, I'll point to the flame. Tell him I already solved that dilemma, but thanks kindly for the update. Sure, I claimed a foreign symbol as my own. I injected one straight into my blood stream without really understanding its meaning or history. I didn't realize other people had a say in its interpretation. But I never let that stop me from reclaiming it once that challenge had been set. Tattoos last forever, yes, but their permanence is only surface-level. The blood beneath them runs fast. They change as much as the wearer.



*Red Clouds of Cliff Island by Denny E. Marshall*

## First Generation

By Stephen Barry

We are the children of exiles  
raised in the land of our fathers' dreams  
but calling home the land of their hunger.  
We sing their songs but with our accents,  
we play our music but with their style.  
Within our homes they have recreated  
the land they left, frozen as it was but never wild.  
And outside our door a strange new world awaits.

They pushed us onward,  
the old shepherd skills so long imbibed  
now used to guide their sons to a better life.  
The greenhorns call us narrowbacks,  
too weak to struggle and strive as they had to do  
made weak by the sacrifice they made  
in order to allow us to be weak.  
But they marvel at who we have become  
while lamenting that we are slipping from their grasp.

And yet the starched white collar chafes  
in ways they cannot understand.  
The concrete, glass, and steel  
form a cage they cannot see.  
Choking and confined we seek to break free,  
to breathe free the crisp air  
to wander the far green hills,  
the ones they sold to provide a better life  
for we then unborn.

## C

By Stephen Barry

Sitting by her hospital bedside  
the old man looked upon his lover's face,  
seeing not the wisps of white hair or the sunken features  
instead he viewed the girl he met years before  
singing on her front porch as he would walk the dunes.  
Using the secret shorthand they developed years before  
when too nervous and unsure to say what they felt.  
He kissed her forehead and whispered "C".  
The one letter they had used to mean so much—  
caring, concern, commitment.  
Looking up, she saw not the weathered features  
but the boy who was so shy and afraid so many years before,  
kicking stones and looking down,  
while his dog napped at their feet.  
With fading breathe she murmured "C",  
sea—powerful, mysterious, uncharted and unknown.  
"C" he responded, si  
the eternal yes, the positive, the affirmative of life.  
With a final smile she gasped "C",  
love continues, love is constant.