

# TATTOOING VIOLET



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**Tattooing Violet**

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## **I DREADED THE MECHANICAL BUZZ**

of Mataora's tattoo machine almost as much as I did the rage that throbbed in the blue veins on my stepfather's bald head. But Mat had by turns awed, coaxed and taunted me so powerfully that I never said no to the pain and pigment his needles pumped into my acne ravaged flesh. Mataora entered our lives as excess baggage tacked onto one of my stepdad's seven marriages, about ten years after my mother died in a car accident. Tattooed head to toe, my half-Maori stepbrother took over the top bunk in my room, boasting of some power called *mana*, which he claimed he'd inherited from battle-hero ancestors. He said he'd temporarily lost his grip on his *mana* because his mamma snatched him out of the village where his daddy was chief and owner of a tattoo parlor. In the meantime he'd learned to borrow power from the plant world. I figured he was nuts—his mother was. But we lived so far out of town that me and my sister Violet had to take the school bus at 5:30 a.m. Me and her hardly spoke a word to each other. So I was glad for company.

My stepdad met Ellen, a curvaceous, high-haired blonde from Christchurch, on a Sunday at a real estate conference in Hawaii and made her his sixth wife the next Saturday. She didn't mention Mat until three days after the wedding. Dad generally believed all women and most people to be liars, so I figure Ellen must have been fucking his brains out. Either that or she had some powers of her own. Not only did she get him to buy and wear those platinum toupees, but the old man

brought Mat home to lily-white Boilsville, Tennessee. I watched slack-jawed as Dad's gold El Dorado Cadillac descended the crunchy gravel driveway and parked behind our house and my new dark-skinned stepbrother got out.

Right off Mat wanted to know everything about my family. I let him read my notebooks, the only person I ever did. He had a couple dozen to peruse. They told him how me and my sister's DNA daddies disappeared when we were babies, a fact our replacement Dad explained with his credo that nobody owed anybody a living. We lived in a tiny German farming village and my stepfather sold life insurance on an American military base. After we returned to bury my mother in New Jersey, stepdad sold lots on one land development after another, moving me and Violet from school to school. Violet's whimpers flowed through the pages, muffled by paneled walls and loud TVs in furnished apartments and mobile homes in one-horse towns in Kentucky, Arkansas and Oklahoma. Until finally my old man landed the job of real estate manager at Lake Sunnyday Resort and we washed up in blue ink in a red brick house.

I wrote my first notebook in crayon when I was about seven or eight. Stepdad had told us to henceforth call him Dad, so of course we did. One night in Germany Dad punctuated an argument with Mom by ramming her head through the gypsum board wall of their walk-in closet. The next morning, me and Violet stood on chairs gaping at a hole that roughly traced the shape of my mother's pretty head. Mat read that and immediately wanted to tattoo me. I said no way.

Other than some tales he told about his childhood and his time as an army drill sergeant, I knew little about my stepfather's past. But once I started those notebooks, I took down everything I saw, and heard. Mat cracked up over my accounts of my old man's love life. For a while there, he changed partners more often than he did lease cars. Jane comes to mind. Dad brought her and her five year-old son Bobby back from a real estate meeting in Nashville. Jane wasn't much to look at, but I think she actually cared about us, and,

boy could she cook. We went from TV dinners and reheated tins to jalapeno fried chicken with black-eyed peas and mashed potatoes. The oven, miraculously clean, smelled of baking pies and biscuits. Dad was so proud he invited his favorite salesman, Andy Ellis, over for dinner, and told him to bring his wife and kids along, too, no less. Dad even started saying we ought to go to church on Sundays. After one fine supper, he gave me a slick, thigh-length black leather coat he'd bought in Spain. Aside from the church part, we all couldn't believe our luck. Of course good eating goes only so far and in just over two weeks I started hearing the familiar sounds of arguing through the air-conditioning ducts. Jane didn't like the way he doled out whiskey-soaked abuse, particularly to the kids, and that pistol he kept under his pillow scared her. A day later Dad gave his usual love-it-or-leave-it speech, and she left it. That night Dad took back his leather coat, and we ate canned ravioli. After supper, he plopped down drunk on the carpet in front of the hi-fi record player. Drinking from the gallon of Canadian Club he kept under the coffee table, he played "Feelings" again and again and again, singing along with Maurice Albert. I lay awake until 3 a.m., listening to his shit-faced wailing until finally he broke the needle and staggered to bed, knocking pictures from the hall wall with his shoulders. Mat fell down laughing at this. *Utu*, he said, couldn't be sweeter. He didn't explain.

Of course to me, writing that stuff and trying to get a grip on life, nothing was funny about it. Standing out by the road waiting for the bus in the dark I'd feel as insubstantial as the mist that shrouded our house. Mat had none of these problems, and that was refreshing.

Ellen hogged the hall bathroom that the four of us were supposed to share—Dad kept the master for himself. Perfume and hairspray overwhelmed the nostrils, and her makeup, tampons and other toiletries and devices crowded our toothbrushes. Her pink rubber douche-bag—Mat had to tell me what it was—hung from the shower head. But her invasion of stepdad's head was more amazing. He practically floated through a whole month—you could say on a cushion of love

vapors—and that new hair made him look ten years younger. Ellen was a beauty, I have to admit, and what a lay she must have been. Good food had never made him behave like that. For a while, almost nothing could piss him off. Ellen bleached the black silk sheets he'd bought in Las Vegas, and made the bed with them. He just laughed. Not only did he not say a word about Mat's appearance, within a month of their arrival, he legally adopted him.

Mat was plenty to overlook. A good thirty pounds heavier than me and a head taller, he had 19 tattoos, each with a story that he claimed, in the right conditions, the tattoo itself would tell. On his stomach was the ferocious likeness of his first killed boar, and his father's and grandfather's faces. His backpiece depicted a mountain-top tiki palace, populated by his hero ancestors. He had the Kanaga clan's triangular pattern on his legs. Our room soon smelled of dirty clothes he scattered over the burnt-orange carpet. His paint brushes and plastic pigment bottles cluttered the long table that served as my desk. Books on Maori myth and psychotropic botany heaped against one wall next to my novels and magazines. Mat told me Maori stories that he insisted were history. He said his namesake was the chief that got the first *moko*. Chief Mataora went into the underworld to recover his wife, Niwareka. She'd left him after he slapped her. Chief Mataora apologized and promised never to hit her again, so Niwareka's father—an underworld chief—gave him the tattoo, the *moko*, which became a Maori tradition. Mat showed me what a *moko* was, drawing a face, sketching in some lines, and explaining how the chief cut curvy grooves into the flesh with a miniature adze made of bone, then rubbing in color.

I asked Mat why he didn't have a *moko*. He said his grandfather and father did, but no one really got them anymore. His mother took him away because she was afraid they'd give him one. "But I have my tattoo machine," he said, holding up that contraption I came to hate. "When I get my *mana* back I will become a chief too." He resented my skepticism, but I couldn't help it.

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