



ANTI-REGRET TIPS:
AVOID BOYFRIEND
PICS/HIS NAME, AND
DON'T DRINK-AND-INK

REMORSE CODE

If every tattoo tells a story, what happens once you've happily moved on?

KATE RAE tackles her tacky marks

FOR OUR FIRST ANNIVERSARY, my boyfriend nervously hands me a present. I open it and melt. It's a dress. Sweet and vintage, black with small hearts, a square neck, cinched waist and a full, happy skirt. It's a dress that longs to be taken to dinners, to twirl on a dance floor. As I swoon, it hits me: It's sleeveless. My heart sinks a little. I don't do sleeveless. Can't do sleeveless. My floral arm band that was so terribly *au courant* one million years ago is now the aesthetic equivalent of the drunk-uncle speech at a wedding. It's a can of Coors Light spilled on a Chloé silk blouse. The only thing it looks good with is a cardigan.

Even sadder: It's just *one* of my shitty tattoos. And apparently I'm not alone. A recent study shows there were 32 percent more tattoo removals in the U.S. in 2012 than

in 2011. But to remove or not to remove is a tough decision. They each mark the past with their spotty ink, each telling the story of me...

The year is 1989. I'm home from first-year university for the summer, reunited with my high school boyfriend. Everything is perfect. I don't remember whose idea the tattoos are, but it feels like a good one. His will be a cow skull from a belt buckle I brought back from a family trip to Alberta. Mine will be a line drawing of Eloise, from my favourite childhood book, on my lower belly. We joke about how her head will grow and stretch when we have babies. We make the appointment from a Yellow Pages listing and jump on the subway. We leave insane with delight, dancing along the sweet tightrope of being 18; of planning marriage and children, >

yet wondering how to hide our tattoos from our parents.

Fast-forward to 1995. I have just returned from eight months in Vancouver, where I had gone to figure out What I Want To Be, and I find myself living with my mother until I can sling enough cocktails to find a place of my own. And get a new tattoo. I want a visual sign that the last gloomy chapter is over. That's the thing about tattoos: They can signal fresh starts, delineate Before and After. I imagine an arm band—a floral arm band! No one has those! I'm chuffed. Freshly inked, I wear tank tops every chance I get. A year later, Pamela Anderson appears in *Barb Wire* and, to commemorate, gets barbed wire around her arm. All of a sudden, a woman with whom I have little in common (other than our questionable taste in men and a penchant for a good bleach job) is my tattoo twin. Immediately, longer sleeves are dispensed.

It's 1997. I move in with a guy I've been seeing for three weeks. And, well, things aren't going exactly as planned. I've got a sickness that causes me to lose 20

pounds in a month, rendering my body so repulsive that I stop looking in the mirror, and my boyfriend enjoys rollerblading more than hanging out with skeletal, miserable me. (Though five years later I would run into him wearing a Phyllis Diller wig and a boyfriend on his arm at a monthly queer dance party, so that explains things.) Recovering from illness and heartbreak, I take a California road trip with my two best friends, like Thelma and Louise and Louise. One sunny day in San Francisco, we walk into a tattoo parlour and agree to mark the moment with a tiny daisy. One friend gets it on her shoulder, another on her ankle, me on my flank. Every time I look at it now, I remember being 26 and free, singing loudly in a car and falling back in love with my body after months of loathing.

2002. A friend calls me up, having just found out her boyfriend has been cheating. I hop on my bike, brandishing smokes and a half-bottle of wine. In her basement apartment, she's downing shots of Jägermeister. "What do you need?" I ask. "A tattoo," she says. I get it:

some other kind of hurt than the one she is feeling; the sharp, sweet pain of a tattoo gun. Off we lurch into a cab, pouring out of it at one of the new tattoo franchises on Queen West. It vibrates with the cheap lighting and circus colours of a McDonald's. Friends never let friends get tattooed alone. And while I may not be brave enough to backpack the world, or have a kid like other normal people my age, this I can do. I decide on a heart with my dog's name, "Lulu," over it, 'cause God, I love that girl. I've learned since the Pamela fiasco though, so this time, I put it somewhere more discreet, and a bit sexy: on my lower back. For months I wear short tops and low-slung pants. I feel it's unusual. Unexpected. Certainly not an area soon to be appropriated by sorority girls, newly single moms and Britney Spears.

Present day. I yearn to wear my new vintage dress to holiday parties. Oh, the possibilities that a tattoo-less arm would present: Strapless LBDs! Leather tanks! Lacy camisoles! I am finally ready to admit that what looked good and felt relevant in my twenties no longer suits me in my forties. I visit Shane of Fading Fast Laser Tattoo Removal in Toronto to see about removing the arm band, and learn it will take approximately 10 laser sessions, spaced six weeks apart. It will feel like "an elastic hitting you over and over again." Sessions will cost up to \$300 each, and I'm warned to do research (think Yelp reviews, not Groupon deals, or risk mottled skin). Money, time, pain—all daunting. But the thought of wearing my dress without resembling Pamela Anderson? I start squirrelling my savings.

Yet there's another, niggling reason I want to erase it for good (well, 90-ish percent of it will disappear anyway): So I can get another in its place, which Shane assures me won't be any more painful. I've been dreaming about a tribute to my nephews and niece for years.

You may think I've learned nothing, but I have: As a wise friend told me after my first, my Eloise: "Careful, tattoos are addictive." □

TATTOO YOU THREE SIGNS OF FASHION AND INK'S CONTINUING LOVE AFFAIR



1. DESIGNER CONNECTIONS: One look at the Capricorn constellation on designer Rachel Roy telegraphs the fashion-world appeal of tattoos. Without detracting from her sophistication, the sprinkling of stars—which she got at Pamela Love's pop-up tattoo parlour during New York Fashion Week—serves as the ultimate stay-put accessory. Love, whose jewelry fans include Alexa Chung and Lily Donaldson, treated show-goers to free tattoos, styled with a Native American and Middle Ages vibe, which she designed alongside her illustrator husband.

2. TATTOO ARTISTS BRANCH OUT: Lizzie Renaud, owner of Toronto's Speakeasy Tattoo shop, is trying her hand at a most contemporary art—over-the-top custom manis, from \$25. At her new studio, Pinky's Nails (pinkynailsto.com), polish slingers can put cartoony characters, all manner of 3-D extras, or van Gogh's *Starry Night* right at your fingertips with a design that lasts up to 10 days.



3. NEW, LOVELY TEMPORARIES: A belief that short-lived body art need not shortchange you on stylish design led Brooklyn, New York's Tina Roth Eisenberg to launch Tattly.com, where you can buy more than 250 stick-on tattoos (they last 3-5 days) from a global roster of professional illustrators. The whimsical yet clean offerings range from elegant lettering to vintage camera etchings. Look for Nelson, B.C., graphic designer Fiona Richards' new hardware-inspired prints (think: screws and saws), coming soon.