Text 6

**Dad’s Tattoos**

adapted from an article by Nell Frizzell

1 There are some superficial differences between my father Bill and me. Just surface stuff. Skin deep. While my pink, freckled body is blank and pictureless, my father’s is an ink-splattered historical document. It is a living, stretching archive. I can use my father’s map of tattoos to navigate continents, relationships, families, journeys and marriages.

2 He got his first tattoo, a butterfly, in Melbourne after several sweaty months of building railways in the outback. After saving enough money, he headed to Melbourne: “I checked myself into a hotel and in one day I bought my first motorbike and got my first tattoo to show I had turned the page. I can vaguely remember thumbing through the book. I didn’t want anything with words or symbolism. It just felt like a classic stamp.”

3 He did what he loved most in his life:\_\_\_\_\_14. From building telephone boxes in a Sydney factory, he earned enough money to hit the hippy trail. He flew to Bali and from there boarded a train through Indonesia, took a boat from Jakarta to Singapore, and then went by buses, hitchhiking and trains up and down Thailand. He flew to Kathmandu, met a “hippy freak” and drove in a van all the way down through India to Goa. Which brings us to the second tattoo.

4 Like so many dropouts before him, my father spent his time in Goa running a hamburger bar. I know what you’re thinking – who runs a burger bar in a Hindu country? Presumably the same sort of person who gets their ankle tattooed by a stranger, in the middle of a dusty market with a needle hitched up to a car battery and no common language. “The tattooist had a book, and I chose this sort of sun thing, with another pattern in the middle. Now it just looks like a franking stamp on my ankle. You could see it because I was walking around with no shoes.” He still walks around with no shoes. And it does look like a passport stamp.

5 There is a 20-year pause until his next tattoo: during which time he met my mother, had me, became a surveyor, got made redundant, drove taxis and finally became a bicycle-riding barefoot builder. After 25 years away from his homeland, Bill went on a trip back to New Zealand. With me, my mum and sister in tow, he stopped over on Auckland’s Ponsonby Road to get a pseudo-Celtic armband tattooed by my cousin Otis. I watched and can still remember his grimace of discomfort as the needle tore into the soft, unmarked skin beside his armpit.

6 My parents were staggeringly incompatible. Plate-smashingly incompatible. Long, screaming arguments into the night incompatible. “It’s sort of funny telling you this, but it was part of leaving your mum,” he says of the black-and-white spiral on his shoulder. “It was a burst out, somehow.”

7 My father and I are back in touch, but years of barely speaking, of disappointment, disaffection, distrust and distance have damaged, perhaps forever, the playful relationship we once had. Yet when I look in the mirror at my prominent collarbones, swelling biceps and flat, gravelhardened feet, I am looking at my father’s body. I can see him, there in my own frame. As he softens into a desk-bound middle age, I am running towards a Bill-shaped future.

8 Now, I am heading to New Zealand to cycle around a foreign country full of people who share my surname and strange nose. I’m off to have an adventure. And I know that makes him very proud. Maybe I’ll even catch a butterfly.

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