

# Forget Botox, I Prefer My Tattoo

By BRENDA CULLERTON

IT was 1 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon. I was chewing my thumbnails in Anil Gupta's office on East Fifth Street, in Manhattan, waiting to get tattooed.

At this same moment, I imagined, quite a few women my age (53) were probably sitting in plusher offices uptown, waiting to get Botox'ed. While they flipped through Vogue and W and listened to light jazz, I pored over Savage and Skin & Ink, lulled by the sounds of Dylan, the Doors and the Dead. "Right arm sleeves," "full bodysuits," "flash," "leg pieces."

I was as riveted by the language as I was by the photos. There was this one 50-year-old woman, a lawyer from Colorado. Until you saw the words "shop hard" written in script on her wrist and "cash only" on her knuckles, she could have been a soccer mom. Either the woman had a great sense of humor, or she'd lost what little was left of her middle-aged mind.

Which was pretty much what most of my friends thought when they heard about my decision to get tattooed. "You're crazy!" howled one exquisitely groomed, discreetly preserved 58-year-old ad executive. "How could you possibly do something so permanent to your body?"

Caught as I was in that riptide of emotions that comes with middle age, I knew that nothing in life is permanent. And here was a friend whose forehead was as smooth and polished as a Granny Smith apple. What would happen if in 10 years she decided to stop her injections of Botox? Would her skin suddenly shrivel up and sag like David Bowie in that vampire movie "The Hunger"?

For my friend Botox wasn't simply a shortcut to looking 10 years younger. It was a way of remaining visible, of reminding the world that she is alive. Even if that wasn't my solution to the fear or agony of aging, I understood it. But her question did raise a painful possibility. What if Mr. Gupta made

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## Is It Safe? What Does It Cost? Does It Hurt?

TATTOOS have long since spread from the steely biceps of sailors and longshoremen to the shoulders, necks, ankles and lower backs of nearly everyone else. Today 1 in 10 Americans has at least one tattoo — including 9 percent of people ages 40 to 64 — according to a national survey published a few years ago in American Demographics magazine.

Still, the tattoo business retains some of its underground aura. And people who contemplate getting one often begin with questions:

**Q.** How do I find a good tattooist?

**A.** Get references from acquaintances with tattoos you like, and then visit the shop. "Finding a tattoo artist is not something you can do on the phone," said Shah

Anderson of Hopkins, Minn., a past president of the Alliance of Professional Tattooists, a 3,000-member organization based in Maitland, Fla., that provides safety training. The shop should "feel a lot like dentist's office or a clinic," he said, and the artist's photos of past work should show clean, clear lines.

**Q.** Is tattooing safe?

**A.** Unless the operation is pristine, blood-borne infections like hepatitis can be transmitted. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends inquiring about a tattoo shop's sterilization practices. Check that all needles are new, that equipment is sterilized in an autoclave and that the tattooist wears disposable gloves, Mr. Anderson said.

Tattooists use a variety of inks and pig-



Robert Presutti for The New York Times

**A PICTURE EMERGES** Anil Gupta, a tattoo artist, illustrating a client's arm.

ments, none of which have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration for injecting into the skin. Allergic reactions are rare, but they can occur months or years after tattoos are placed.

**Q.** How much does a tattoo cost?

upon the intricacy of the design, Mr. Gupta charges between \$300 and \$400 an hour.)

I had no intention of talking or exposing anything more than the inside of my left ankle. As his eyes glanced back and forth between that still-empty space on my foot and his penciled sketch of my tattoo (a tiny open book), I asked if he got a lot of old ladies like me in here.

"You mean mature women?" he asked. "Most still have their mothers echoing around in their head, so it's a secretive, private thing. The tattoos are hidden." They are hidden everywhere from the crook of the shoulder to "a lady's nether regions," as Mr. Gupta politely put it.

"So what's the story behind your book?" Mr.

Gupta finally asked, picking up a black pen and starting to draw on my ankle.

"I'm building my brand as an author," was my flippant response. Suppressing a giggle (the flutter of his pen tickled), I thought about its real significance. Mostly, the open book was ironic. Because I'm not — an open book. Not even after having written a soul-stripping memoir. For me the image was a symbol of a certain coming of age, of an inexplicable elation that seemed to have

risen up out of nowhere. The blank pages would remind me of all that was yet to be written.

Erasing the first sketch with a cotton ball soaked in alcohol, he read my mind again. "Many women your age come looking for closure or to celebrate," he said. "But not the youngsters. They're a visual generation.

The ideas are skin deep." I nodded, hoping that all this talk wouldn't distract him. "Tattooing is so acceptable now," he sighed. "Everything that starts as a cult and ends up as a religion loses the element of nonconformity, you know? It all becomes homogenous."

It has become so homogenous that I recently read that Nike employees are tattooing their company logo, the swoosh, on various body parts. Talk about corporate branding. I mean, whatever happened to rebellion and protest, to the idea of tattoos being a means of glorifying one's status as an outcast? Even Savage described tattooing and piercing as a "lifestyle choice." It sounded like Martha Stewart.

When I heard the buzz of Mr. Gupta's ink gun, I winced and clutched the arms of my chair the same way I do on airplanes during

takeoffs and turbulence. The first prick felt like a wasp sting. As he began to outline the sketch of my book in black ink, he wiped the blood away with more cotton. And sure enough, as he predicted, I was talking. "It's the pain," he said. "Pain makes people talk."

"True," I said, thinking out loud. "But pain also makes people write and paint and create music. And oh my God. Where am I going with this, Anil?"

Mr. Gupta let loose his first real belly laugh. Mercifully he'd also put down his gun. I had always dealt with, or perhaps denied, my own pain by exploring other people's pain. And I was curious about Mr. Gupta. "So how did you end up reducing the world's greatest masterpieces into miniatures?" I asked. The buzz of the gun resumed, and I fought the impulse to pull my foot away. It felt as if I had stepped into a nest of furious, stinging wasps.

He explained that as the son of a man who illustrated giant movie posters for Bollywood, he used to paint eyes that were two stories high.

"Maybe," he said with a deep-throated chuckle, "inventing the miniature was my form of rebellion." The rebellion paid off. After he appeared on the now-defunct TV series, "Ripley's Believe It or Not," Mr. Gupta's career was on its way. "People fly in from all over the country now," he said.

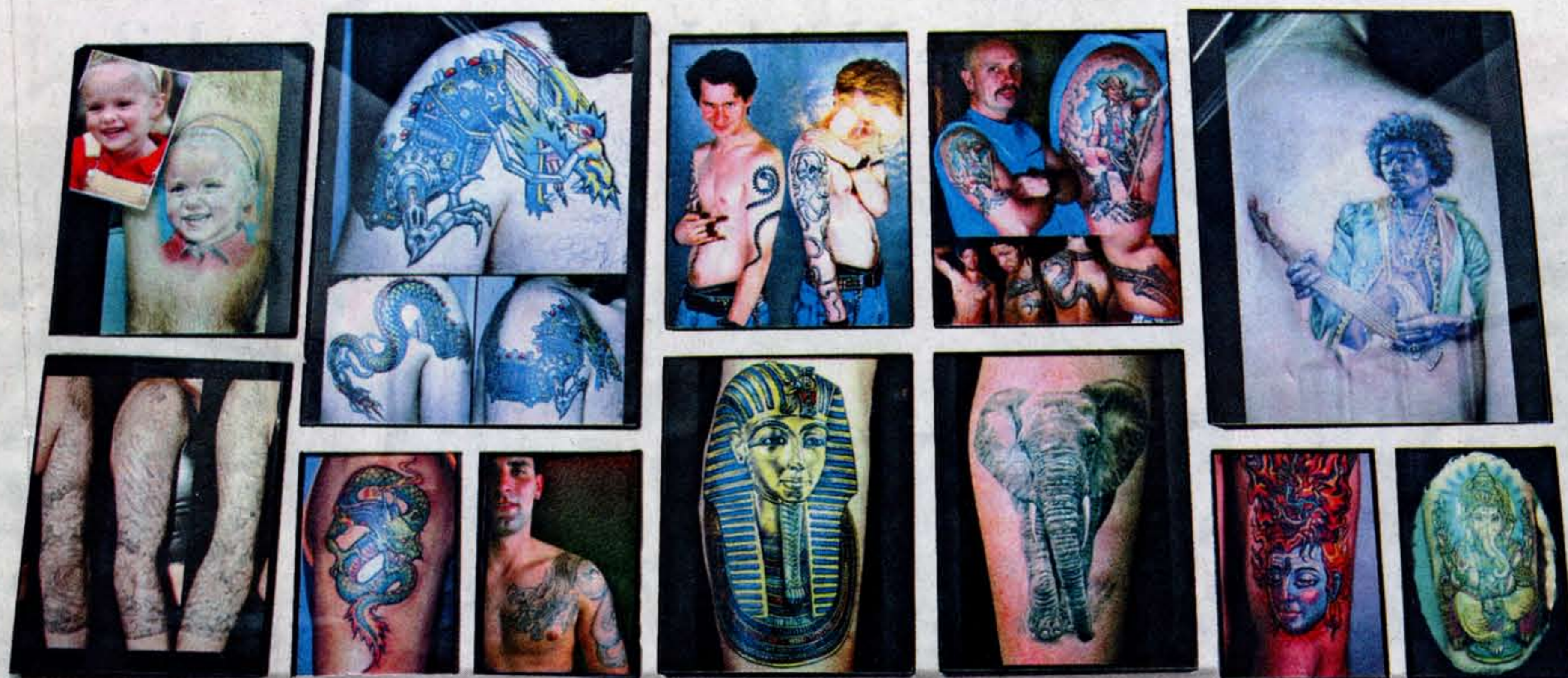
"Take a look," he said, sitting back and patting the sweat from his brow. A glimpse at my ankle revealed my open book, with a perfect binding and shadowed pages that appeared to flutter when I moved. "You have chosen a good spot," he said, changing needles and filling his gun with white ink for the blank pages. "This area wrinkles slower than other parts of the body."

Forty minutes later he was done. After gently wrapping the wound in a gauze bandage, he sent me on my way with a sheet of after-care instructions and a phone number to call "day or night."

In the weeks since, I've thought about how it is that scars make us human. Far from thinking it a mistake, I am so proud of my new tattoo that I have been walking around sockless, even in the pouring rain and the freezing cold. I pull up my foot in restaurants to show it off and find myself talking to total strangers, to kids with holes in their noses and navels and pictures of writhing snakes and dragons all over their bodies.

When we chat, I like to think that what they see is not an often tired, wrinkled 53-year-old woman but a fabulous tattooed lady with an open book on her ankle, a woman with a story to tell. And that, to me, is a beautiful thing. It makes me feel alive.

## Skin Deep



Photographs by Robert Presutti for The New York Times

**REASSURING IMAGES** A gallery of photographs of tattoo clients in the office of Anil Gupta offered comfort to the author as she awaited her chance.



**AN OPEN BOOK** The author's tattoo, illustrating a coming of age.

**A.** From \$50 (for a short name or small heart or other picture) to thousands of dollars for large, elaborate images.

**Q.** Does it hurt?

**A.** The pain is usually tolerable but varies by location on the body, Mr. Anderson said. The most tender skin is around the rib cage, and the toughest is on the upper arms.

**Q.** What if I decide I don't like it?

**A.** Dissatisfaction is the most common problem people have with tattoos, according to the F.D.A. Skin grafting or dermabrasion (surgical scraping) can get rid of them, but the most popular way to erase a tattoo is with a laser. Anywhere from 4 to 10 treatments (costing \$350 to \$600 each) may be needed to zap away a tattoo completely.

MARY DUENWALD