



**PIERCINGS,  
TATTOOS,  
& PERFECT  
WEDDINGS:  
AT HOME WITH  
THREE GROWN  
DAUGHTERS**

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Here's the scene: It's December 28 and I'm sitting in our kitchen, reading the newspaper, drinking a cup of decaffeinated coffee and contemplating the meaning of the word "vacation" as it relates to having a house full of almost-grown children. My youngest daughter, who is sixteen, approaches and asks could I help her get her new navel jewelry in? because it seems like the purple die doesn't fit on the stainless steel ring. Maybe pliers?

I look at the objects she is holding: a miniscule purple die, maybe a quarter of an inch by a quarter of an inch; a rounded piece of stainless steel, curved, ends almost but not quite meeting. On the table she has laid two pairs of pliers: a blue-handled needle-nosed pair and one of the heavy awkward kind you use when the handle has fallen off the bath tub spigot and bath tub handle is still on your hardware store list. Look-ing at it, it's hard to imagine using it in the same sentence as that miniature purple object, much less wrapped around it.

I take the die and the ring and try to look at them. At fifty I can still see fine, as long as the objects are big enough and have no fine details, like holes smaller than the eye of the needle I can't thread. And, as I come to realize, those holes are supposed to fit onto the ends of the metal ring. How, I don't know. And why is entirely another question.

I know my fingers are locked around the two pieces, because I can feel them, and if I hold them exactly the right distance from my face, I can see them, although they seemed to blend in and out of the back-ground. This metal thing fits on this purple thing? I ask again, just to make sure I've got it right. And first it has to go through your belly button? She nods. I bring my hands together and try to stay focussed while my fingers come together. There's no way, I say, look how tiny this purple thing is. It's a die, mom, she says, and I know, that's why I thought you could use pliers. She picks up the pliers:

*continued on page 2*

maybe the opening on the ring needs to be bigger? I look at the pliers and her belly button, which currently has the old jewelry in it, a metal ring with a ball screwed on it, and I find myself thinking back to the day I was introduced to the concept of belly piercing.

I remember the fear I felt when we entered the tattoo and piercing parlor. And I recall wishing she could just do something easy, like get her whole body tattooed. Why did it have to be a hole in her navel? Doesn't she read the same articles I do, about infection and death and well, you know, piercings? And I thought about the years a mother spends protecting her child from pain and mutilation, like knee scars, only to have them grow up and put painful holes in their pristine bodies. I recalled the first month after the piercing, when I would try to casually look at her belly, something which is easier to do now that her shirts end right below her bust line, and assess whether it was healing and did it look infected? and what was that crusty stuff? and was she still alive? I would ask questions like, are you swabbing and dabbing and cleaning? and would get short, terse, teenage-like answers, like “I know what I'm doing” or “it's my belly button”, which was definitely true, jewelry and all.

I realized I'd come a long way since those days, which I think is probably the point of having children: a long, drawn-out reshaping of all your values and expectations, not to mention how you talk and what you wear. And at stake is the life and body of someone you love more than you ever imagined. It's a great system, and I can report that having three such opportunities has made me into a more open-minded person, which is good. I think. It has certainly kept me on my toes. Never give in to relaxation is my motto and it works.

I spent about half an hour with the die and pliers and the ring (sounds like either a German opera or a porno movie) but to no avail. I could hook the ring into one of the holes, but it wouldn't go into that second hole. It would catch on one of the white dots, the ones that make it qualify as a die, and are the size of the nucleus of an atom but visible to the naked teenage eye. Fortunately, I did all this off the body, so to speak, and my daughter was able to go back in her room and listen to music, call her friends and peruse catalogs of piercing jewelry. I finally gave up and suggested she ask someone with younger eyes and nimbler fingers.

And it's lucky I did that, because my second daughter, who is twenty, was waiting for my attention. She wanted to know, could I put lotion all over her back, first thoroughly washing my hands? Because the guy at the tattoo store had said she needed to lotion her tattoo three

times a day for the first week.

Yes, my twenty-year-old has a brand new tattoo on her back, a design that starts at the base of her neck and goes about halfway down her spine. It is the size of an eight-and-a-half by eleven sheet of paper. I know this because she showed me the picture she'd chosen before she went to have it done and that was the size of the page. Of course, I naively thought it was that large so the tattoo artist could see all the details.

I guess I knew it wasn't going to be one of those tiny designs you hide on your upper arm or on your ankle or something, but well, her *whole* back? Do you know how long it takes to tattoo a perfect, unmarred, skin-colored back permanently? Four hours. Four painful hours, I've been told, which should have been a deterrent, but wasn't.

I find myself looking back again. I remember watching a needle going into this particular daughter's three-month-old thigh, as she was inoculated, and hearing her cry and wishing I could save her from any pain. Who could know she would grow up to pay some unknown amount of money for four hours of it?

I am thinking all this while I am spreading Keri lotion (unscented, as specified by the artist) all over a beautiful red and black Native American design. In it are three faces, each with bared teeth. One is a bear and he seems to be protecting an owl, who is wearing a mask. In the middle of all of them is a bird who looks as if she trying to escape. There are six black circles with red inside, like a row of eyes, but they are on the end of the bird's tail. It's difficult to tell where one animal ends and the other begins, but I think that's the point. And I like it, I have to admit. I do, it's just that, well... you know.

And while I am gently, carefully rubbing, my eldest daughter walks into the kitchen. This daughter is twenty-five, engaged to be married and currently on a quest to find bridesmaid dresses for her sisters. She glances at The Back and cringes.

“Isn't it beautiful?” I say, to clue her into the need for supportive sisterly behavior. She looks at me.

“This certainly narrows the possibilities for those dresses,” she comments. “No low backs, no see-through fabric.”

“Oh,” I say, “good point.” And, I realize, it's true. This wedding has been planned carefully and certainly a large black and red Native American design isn't going to fit into the blue-grey color scheme. Probably better to hide it behind a thick layer of impermeable-to-light

fabric. This could be a challenge.

I am sometimes taken aback by the differences between my daughters. My engaged daughter is conservative in dress and manner. She is motivated, organized, carefully compiling a resume that will lead to a job in her chosen field. Concurrently attending graduate school and planning an elaborate wedding.

My tattooed daughter is in college and outfits herself in mainly thrift store clothes, which look great on her. She is doing well and enthusiastically planning her next tattoo.

My youngest, well, let's simply say that her big sister probably erred when she asked that her hair be a natural color for the wedding, because while her hair is only purple on the very tips, a lip ring has recently been added to her piercing collection.

When I took her to the store to have her lip pierced, I tried to bring up the subject of her sister's wedding.

“You could probably take the ring out for the ceremony,” I mused, as if it had just occurred to me.

“No,” she said.

“Oh,” I tried to throw in a friendly laugh, “I guess that settles it.”

“Yes,” she growled.

Having tapped all my resources, I decided to leave it to the bride.

Especially since I have my own wedding issues to address. With four months to go, I am on a search for a mother-of-the-bride dress. It could show both my back and my belly, since they are still virgin territory, but probably won't. I'm not allowed to wear my favorite color, which is charcoal grey, and unlike my sixteen-year-old, I'm going to follow the rules. But like her, I find myself tempted to find a loophole. A color-coordinated loophole, of course. Like a blue-grey tattoo. Or a discreet sapphire nose stud.

I realize this is because there is a part of me, greatly magnified by my less conservative daughters, that can imagine these adjustments to the body status quo. After all, it's not as if my body is going to stay the same, anyway. It is rounded where it used to be sleek, and what I used to think was looking tired I now see is more like looking my age. And there *is* some family history here. I remember when my mother was pregnant with my youngest brother. As a joke, one of her friends gave her a belly button jewel, which was a large plastic dark blue adhesive

stone and she wore it with the one bathing suit that revealed her navel. I loved it. But then, I’ve always been attracted to cheap glittery objects, although, given the opportunity, I could probably be attracted to expensive glittery objects.

Anyway, maybe that small rebellion of my mother’s has lodged somewhere inside of me because sometimes I yearn to express that feeling, whatever it is. And as I observe my daughters, I realize how perfectly they demonstrate these parts of myself. I can imagine tattooing my back, but can’t imagine tolerating the attention it would draw to myself. Piercing my lip would probably be pushing it, but my belly button? Maybe. I dress as my eldest daughter dresses, we have much the same taste, although my clothes tend to be greys and blacks and she wears more navy. Yet when my twenty-year-old tries on a hot pink shirt over her olive green pants with the feathers at the hem of each pant leg, I can honestly say she looks beautiful.

Maybe this is another reason we have children. Maybe as they are stretching us, forcing us into unknown territory, they are actually unearthing those qualities we have kept hidden. Maybe they are like shiny reflective fragments of ourselves and if we take the time to look, we will find aspects we’ve long forgotten. And maybe it won’t be a tattoo or a piercing or a streak of blue in our hair, but will, instead, be a small shift in how we see ourselves in the world.

Because those may be wrinkles and that may be a gray hair, but inside? I’m nineteen. And when you’re nineteen, anything’s possible.

So if you happen to be in North Carolina in May and you happen to come upon a wedding, check out the mother of the bride. No promises, mind you, but I’ve got some ideas.