“Mastectomy.” By Richard McKay. Copyright 2016.

Darryl Zwiff was driving home from the junior college where he taught basic English to people mystified by basic English. The filler news item on NPR was about middle-aged, middle-class women getting tattoos, and Darryl was paying attention. Actually, the person he hoped would turn into his next girlfriend was herself a middle-aged, middle-class woman. She had no tattoos, or at least none visible to the casual glance, and he found himself wondering what sort of tattoo would be most becoming on her.

Darryl met Janice Cooper while volunteering with an adult literacy class at church. They’d dated, but their relationship was still not as solid as he hoped it might later become. He liked the idea of suggesting that she consider a tattoo, and wondered how she would react to it. He didn’t yet know how wide her bad-girl streak was, or indeed, if she even had one. He hoped that she did. Maybe he’d broach the idea as a joke. If she freaks, hey; just kidding, right? And if she doesn’t freak, well, she doesn’t freak.

“Have you ever thought of getting a tattoo?” Darryl asked Janice during a longish discussion after a class in the church basement. It had taken him several minutes to finesse the conversation to the point where he could get away with asking a somewhat personal question. He was fishing, and hoped that she wouldn’t notice.

“Yes and no.” “Not seriously, anyway.” Her answer was more no than yes. Janice didn’t think herself a prude, but then she didn’t think of herself as the sort of person who might have a tattoo, either. There were two women with tattoos in the circle of suburban bohemians she considered her edgy friends. There were probably more, but, as with other things in life, some tattoos were not visible for a reason, and Janice thought it best not to speculate about her less intimate friends. If it were her business to know about it, she’d already know.

She thought of an acquaintance, older than her daughter but still of that generation. She had a graceful, leafy vine tattoo that followed the contours of her left arm. It was bewitching in its way, but not what her own arm needed right now. She thought about women getting tattoos in more private areas of their bodies, and wondered how it would be to have one of her own. What would it be, and where, exactly, would she put it? Would anyone but her close friends ever see it? How would she explain it in the doctor’s office?

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Mike Fields’s girlfriend, Leah Cooper, usually got to the cafeteria first, but this time she was late, so Mike picked their table. Mike and Leah worked at XYZ Metrics, where they met a year and a half ago. Mike had already started eating when Leah came in. Leah said that she had spent the last few minutes on the phone with her mother, Janice.

“Apparently she thinks she needs a tattoo,” she said. Leah offered this datum carefully, hoping with little expectation of success that she’d get an equally careful response from Mike. “At least I think she thinks,” she added.

Tattoos were rare in Leah’s family, and likely to provoke some controversy if mentioned with anything more than scientific curiosity. An uncle, a Navy veteran, had an anchor on his arm; otherwise, her family was free of illustration, as was Mike’s.

“She thinks she needs a tattoo?” Mike asked. “’Breathing’ is an example of something she needs. She doesn’t need a tattoo. What’s she gonna get? ‘*Mom’*?”

Janice was, of course, her own person, and old enough to decide if she wanted a tattoo or not, but few who knew her at least fairly well would expect her to decide in favor of it. At 54, she was arguably too old for the sort of midlife course adjustment implied by a tattoo, and asserting rebellious individualism to her parents would now be impossible without a Ouija board and a much worse attitude than Janice had, even on a bad day. Mike had known Leah’s mom almost as long as he’d known Leah, and this, he felt, entitled him to an opinion on the matter. This was not like her, and Mike thought it proper to bear witness to this obvious fact.

“She said she was talking about it with her sort-of boyfriend,” Leah added. “Some guy named Darryl. They thought it might be fun.”

“I mean, this is real, right? She’s really thinking about this?”

“I don’t know how serious she was, but yeah, that’s what she said.”

The conversation was becoming more interesting than the sandwich that Mike was neglecting.

“Where’s she putting it? Does she even know yet?” Mike figured that, assuming Janice was indeed serious, discussion of the tattoo’s design and location was next in the queue. But Mike wasn’t sure he wanted to pursue those thoughts at the expense of vocalizing the idea that Janice’s new boyfriend seemed to be leading her into a wrong neighborhood.

“She mentioned a boob,” Leah said with some hesitation, as if saying it slowly would alter the chemistry of the situation.

Mike responded with a theatrical “huh?” and found himself not quite knowing how to enlarge on the topic and still keep a respectful distance from it. The next moment Mike thought about asking which one she had in mind, but dismissed the idea quickly after reflecting that it was not, after all, any of his beeswax, if indeed it ever would be, and might also strike Leah as inappropriate.

“So who’s going to see it there? You know, uh…” Mike’s voice trailed off.

“I don’t know. Maybe she’s got a secret life or something,” Leah offered, knowing well enough that her mother’s forthright nature mooted any question of a hidden life. At any rate, Janice confided in her daughter as a matter of course. Leah assumed she’d hear soon enough about anything important on her mind.

“Well, she’ll do what she wants. This guy Darryl is a boob himself,” Mike added. “He’s probably a perv or something.”

In a later rehashing of the situation Leah decided that she was ready to come out with a definite negative opinion of the whole affair, and said so to Mike. He still didn’t like the idea, either, and they both passed an enjoyable half-hour settling their opinion of Darryl and his boobish designs on Janice.

“All right. The gauntlet is down,” Mike spoke directly to Leah, watching for her to return his enthusiasm for a counterbalancing response to the tattoo/boyfriend crisis. Mike thought that framing the situation as a schoolyard payback match might raise Leah’s sporting hormones, if indeed they needed raising, given that Mr. Boob had, in thought at least, already violated her mother’s skin. Little doubt that worse indecencies threatened, if they had not already taken place.

On the following Saturday afternoon Mike came home with a package from the arts and crafts store under his arm.

“This will help us focus our thinking about Darryl and your mom’s tattoo,” said Mike, holding a cork bulletin board. “I got the idea from one of the blogs I read. It’s like a wish list, only you put pictures on it. We divide the board into two, one side for no tattoos, and the other for getting rid of Darryl the boob. It’s simple and direct,” he noted, deferring to Leah’s preference for linear narratives. “And it’s got no moving parts,” he added, hoping that a waggish note would ground Leah’s suspicions, if indeed she had any.

“Okay, but is it supposed to do something? How does it work?” Leah agreed that this could be fun, and maybe even helpful, but wasn’t sure she found its metaphysics compelling. Her own spirituality skewed towards the practical.

“It helps correct fuzzy thinking. It’s like a pair of glasses. It lets you see a goal, and then you can do something to get it.”

Leah thought about it. If it helped guide energy towards something worthwhile, and Mike thought it was a good idea, too, then heck; why not?

For the side dedicated to Janice’s tattoo-in-waiting they put cut-out magazine pictures of tattooed models, with circle-slash “prohibited” signs glue-sticked to appropriate spots on their bodies. On Darryl’s side they wrote “Bye Bye Boobie,” in honor of the musical that Mike had worked backstage on in high school. This side had pictures of people waving goodbye at cruise terminals and airport security checks.

“Is it okay if we put it on the wall near the bathroom?” Mike asked. Leah consented. They further decided that when they passed it they would remind themselves to smile optimistically and say out loud how wonderful it is to be rid of a toxic boob and have a tattoo-free mom into the bargain. The following weekend Leah bought a couple of shiny brass sconces to hang by each side of the board. The red candles she put in them added a certain life to the display. There was no real chance that Janice would ever see it, and they could always take it down quickly if they ever had to.

The idea, they agreed, was that they were simply honoring the notion that Darryl and Janice were ill-suited for each other. Both guessed, but with some conviction, that Janice was of a similar mind, at least on some hidden level. They were also pretty sure that Darryl had picked his quarry, and did not doubt that, with help, his quarry was already in the process of getting un-picked.

A week or so later Janice phoned Leah. “How about you and Mike come over for dinner on Saturday? You know; you could meet Darryl.”

“Okay; thanks!” she said. “We can do that.” Leah’s fast acquiescence put Janice at ease.

“Got any announcements to make?” Leah asked, hoping that, this soon after her mother’s first revelation, she didn’t have any announcements to make.

“No; just dinner. You know: ‘Meet and greet.’”

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Leah looked out the car window while Mike drove them to Janice’s house. Her emotional state was an unusual combination of arousal and relaxation. Normally she’d be somewhat nervous about the confrontations implied by the evening, even if they were essentially benign, and would be chattering about this and that to soothe her nerves. Today, though, neither she nor Mike felt much need for conversation. Whatever the evening held, both were ready to let it unfold and engage with it.

Darryl answered the door with a booming “Hi, kids!” and introduced himself. Mike noticed that Darryl had a deeper voice than he imagined. He wasn’t expecting Darryl’s firm handshake and civic-club smile, either, and wondered about the furtive introvert he’d conjured in his mind. The three made their way to the kitchen to fix drinks and pay their respects to the hostess, who was toiling over a pot of boiled potatoes.

Darryl and Leah made for the living room, and Darryl found a seat on the couch. Leah sat in a chair near Darryl. She sipped from her wine glass. Leah noticed that Darryl was already nearly finished with what she hoped was not his first helping from the bar. She felt herself in command of a situation that was already beginning to break in her favor. Social tail-sniffing wasn’t one of her strengths, but today she was ready for a challenge. “Let’s have fun with this,” she thought.

“So, has Mom shown you her whip yet?” she said with enough easy conviction that an observer might conclude that the whip, and indeed, Darryl, were planned as part of an after-dinner frolic. She took another sip from her drink and looked at him. Darryl forced a chuckle. “We don’t know each other quite that well yet,” he offered, and scanned the furniture in the living room.

“Don’t forget to ask her about her previous boyfriend,” she added after a long moment. “I never bothered to figure out how to pronounce his name. Just as well,” she fibbed, as if revealing an amusing secret. “I think he had a restraining order.”

As much for her own convenience as through any humanitarian prompting, Leah changed the subject, mentioning Darryl’s work with her mother at the church. She knew that it had something to do with teaching adults to read, so she launched into a story about an employee of her father’s who had improved his marginal English by reading comics. “Can people learn to read like that?” she asked.

Darryl considered answering that it seems to have worked okay for her and just about everyone else that ever tried it, but thought the better of it. He was sure that Leah interpreted his hesitation as discomfort or uncertainty. As he was casting around for a better response, Janice and Mike came in. “Dinner’s in about twenty minutes,” Janice said, and seated herself on the couch a sociable distance next to Darryl.

“I was watching one of those reality shows the other day,” Leah announced to the group, “and they had this heifer on with this hideous tattoo up here,” indicating on herself the approximate spot that she thought her mother might be considering for her own tattoo. “I thought it was a port-wine birthmark when I first saw it. I wanted to yell ‘Did one of your kids finger-paint it on?’”

“I know. I hate it when people have these ridiculous tattoos,” Mike offered, aware that he wasn’t really adding anything to the conversation besides agreeing with Leah. He wondered what was going through Janice’s mind right now, and what sort of personal commitment, if any, this tattoo thing had become. Had Leah been too forthright in her opinion? He thought that Darryl looked like a kid at a bus station waiting for gramma and grampa to pick him up, and they were late.

“Yeah,” Darryl agreed. He certainly didn’t want to go on record advocating for ridiculous tattoos, and didn’t feel up to a discussion about what might separate a ridiculous tattoo from one that wasn’t. “I don’t watch that much TV,” Janice said, and hoped that the conversation would steer itself to more genial topics before she would have to steer it herself.

Darryl felt that the table would be his place to shine at last, and had several interesting food-related facts on tap that might establish him to Janice as a knower of arcane and important things. Before dinner few would have guessed that his expertise extended to details of the raising of beef cattle, the difference between dry-aging and wet-aging beef, how Texas root stock saved French wines during the Great French Wine Blight, how seasoned wine tasters can be fooled by their palates when blindfolded, and other fascinations having as their common denominator their ability, when overused, to strangle pleasant and amusing chat.

At one point Janice and Leah attempted a sidebar conversation about a quilt show they were both planning to see. Darryl cornered Mike with a disquisition on the merits of the new automatic transmissions over the stick shift. A bottle of pinot noir stood between them, and both poured from it.

“Well,” said Darryl at meal’s end, “I hope no one will mind if I take this chance to practice my trumpet.” He excused himself to the bedroom.

“Trumpet…” Mike mouthed the word silently after Darryl left the room. He raised his eyebrows and looked to Janice. If, instead, he had looked at the centerpiece she would have waited for it to answer before offering that this was another of Darryl’s talents. When he showed up earlier with his horn Janice thought it a bit odd, and had no idea when he thought he was going to play it. She knew now. It occurred to her that if she had said something right away she might have averted what had already become an uncomfortable situation. As muffled tooting came from the bedroom, Janice thought that this would be a good time to change the subject.

“Who wants a nice cup of cheesecake and coffee?” she asked, leaving for the kitchen.

“And how about a nice slice of coffee with that?” Mike said to Leah as they began clearing the table.

On the drive home Leah mused that after her whip reference Darryl’s face reminded her of someone who just found out that he’d been selected as a juror in a murder case. “I’m willing to hear an argument, though, that it was the Trumpet Incident that put the seal on a lovely evening.”

“Maybe we should buy him a harmonica,” Mike suggested.

At their apartment a month or so afterwards, Mike could hear Leah talking on the phone in the bedroom. He assumed, from the length of the call and the number of times that she stopped in mid-sentence, that she was talking with her mother. At length she interrupted a string of uh-huhs and yeahs with “Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” and followed this with banter that Mike couldn’t hear. Sometime later the conversation ended, and Leah came into the room waving her fist in the air. “That was Mom. She and Darryl are officially bust-a-roonie,” she announced.

Isn’t it strange how things sometimes work themselves out, but it also happened that Darryl had applied for a job as department head at a school far enough away to put any possibility of rekindling their relationship out of the question without a lengthy plane ride.

“We won’t be hearing about the Darryl boob anymore,” said Leah. “It sounds like she’s dropping that tattoo thing, too.” “Mastectomy complete,” she added.