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A WORD ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER



I have no idea what I'm doing out of bed

Lila Rees

Born: October 2, 1979

Where: Burlington, VT

Siblings: One brother, older

Married: Yes

Job: Tattoo artist

Lila Rees' tattoo shop in downtown Barre is in a former clothing store with a 1950s look, an elevated service area, and a work zone that suggests a dentist's space, complete with drills. Ideas for images of tattoos are everywhere. There are anatomy books for real aficionados of her trade and a book filled with the fabulous work of Hokusai. Not much of a tattoo parlor denizen, I stare at *Death or Glory* inked around a skull. In a hardware case some mouth iron for piercing suggests dumbbells for elves. I thumb a flip book of girl sayings that include *I have no idea what I'm doing out of bed* and *So many men, so many reasons to sleep alone*. For a few minutes I watch one of Lila's clients, a young guy with needles going in and out of his flesh as the artist gives him a Celtic design on a shoulder. Once he hands over money (*We take cash*, is a conspicuous sign in the service area), I sit with Lila in the work zone and we talk about her having opened Rock City Tattoo in one of Vermont's more down-and-out towns.

We're in this depressed economy. Do you feel this is a dark time?

It's pretty bad, I think. Just judging from last year, when I opened, to this year. It seems that all the people who didn't have jobs last year still don't have jobs now. I don't know if I just got lucky and it was like, Ah, a new tattoo shop in Barre. Now it's just like, I'm old news. Or people just don't have money.

I was jamming for months. You couldn't even talk to me. You had to have an appointment to talk to me. Then it died.

But I was really lucky in the last few months. I got married and my dad bought me a house, which was totally dumb luck. If that house hadn't come into my hands, and I hadn't gotten married with another income, I would not be open right now. (Lila lets go a shrill, bewitching giggle, an element of her dark sense of humor). I don't like to think about it.

What about Barre. Is the city's economy slack?

Barre? When I moved here, I didn't know what the big difference between Montpelier and Barre was . . . until I found out the histories of the two cities. Barre was the blue collar, working class, granite industry. Then that died, for whatever reason. Montpelier, the state house, all the hippie dippy stuff. We have the federal court house, the welfare office. And for some reason the state of Vermont sends all the guys on furlough to live in Barre.

That's why, if you drive from Montpelier to Barre, on Route 302, you see like a million motels. That's where all these guys go who are fresh out of jail, sex offenders. They don't have vehicles. They have to walk to the court house, walk to the welfare office. It really sucks. They're not sending them anywhere else but Barre. I didn't kind of know that. I just sort of thought, Central Vermont, whatever—Barre, Montpelier, it's all the same. But it's *not* the same! (She laughs shrilly.) When I worked in Montpelier for a couple of years, when I decided that I wanted to leave, I asked every single client where are you from. Not one of them said Montpelier. They all said Barre, or Orange, or you know, kind of out there. But ninety percent said Barre. So why not put a shop in Barre?

The customers are definitely . . . they are totally out of this world. I think more so even than in Montpelier. When people come here, they feel so much more at ease. They tell me everything. The stories they tell me, and the stuff I observe—it's pretty bizarre.

How did you start this place? Where's you get the dough?

When I came here, I called ever single bank in Barre. As soon as they said, "What kind of business do you want to open?" and I said, "Tattoo shop," they would immediately tell me, "No way. *No way!*" I saw [a rental prospect in Barre] on Craigslist, Could be tattoo shop. And I found out the place was in this building. I immediately loved the building. I loved the entrance way, I loved this space in here, the ceilings. Everything about it was exactly what I wanted. I literally had no money. I had no savings. I just decided I was going to do it.

That's when the big economy crashed [September 2008], when everything was going bad. A bank was not going to give me a twenty-five thousand dollar loan to open a tattoo shop in Barre. I walked in, they'd just laugh at me and say, "Get out of here!" I had basically spent my entire

twenties building up my credit. I'd never had a credit card. Yet I had perfect credit. And in this one week window I applied for every credit card I could get, and they all approved me. I traded my vehicle—I had this Audi—because how were we going to build this shop when no one had a truck? I went out and got the truck. I did it to sort of keep ahead of the creditors. They wouldn't be able to trace how much I was borrowing in a week! They need time to kind of digest it, so I basically opened every credit card I could . . . and maxed them out.

Now, that's what's been screwing me. I'm on a credit-card treadmill. I basically shut all my avenues for financial freedom by opening this shop.

So, what's your vision? Where would you like to see your business go?

I'd like it to be a private shop. Appointment only. I want to do two clients a day. Custom work for them. Don't kill myself, working all the time. And I'd like to relocate.

Everybody says it takes five years to get established. Especially as a tattoo-er, it takes time. I would like to sort of end up back in Burlington. The problem is that Burlington is over saturated with shops. It's very competitive. The rents are high. But if I get good enough and people want my services, specifically, I might be able to pull off a small, private shop up that way. I really don't like living in Barre.

Except, well, zoning is a tit here. There's like no zoning. (More laughter, a gushing smile.) When I called, they were like, "Yeah, we got one guy that fills in every other week, for an hour." So that was great. He was like, "You want a permit? I'll give you one right now." All that stuff factors in when you open a business. In Burlington, it's like pulling teeth. Here, it was real laid back. I did have some battles with my landlord, but we sorted that all out.

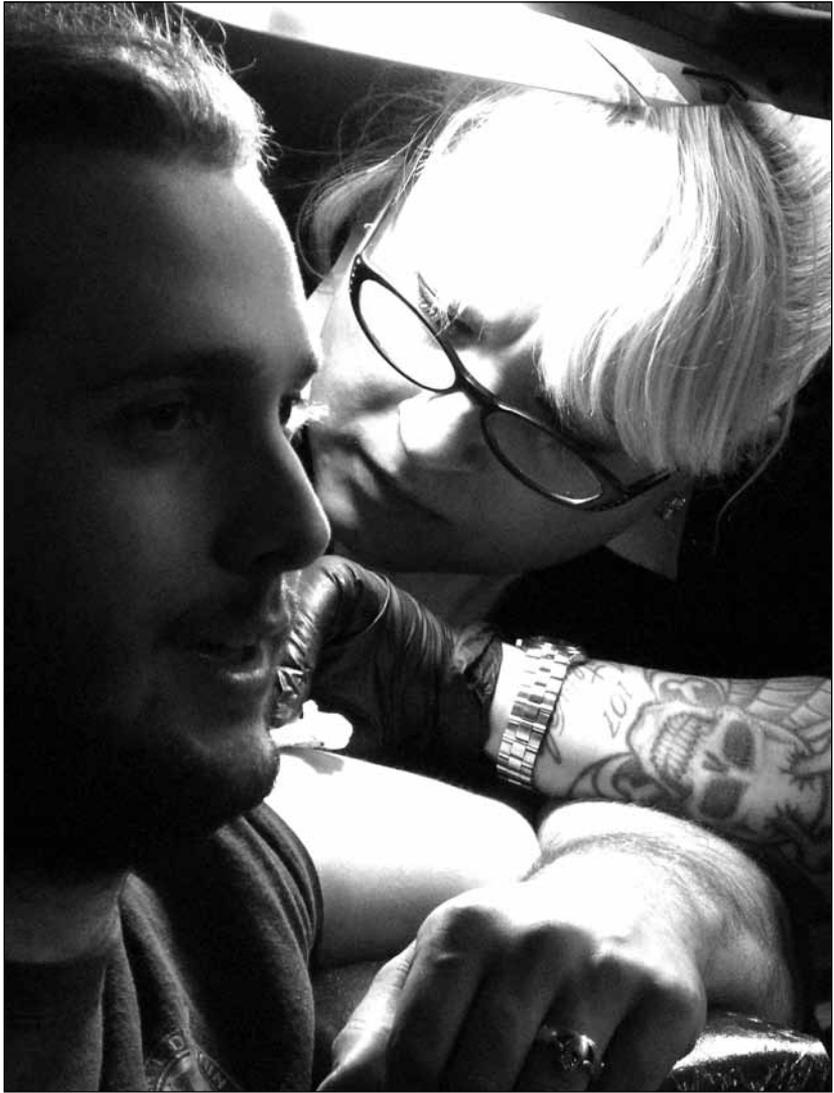
The other cool thing is that it's real easy to get famous in Barre. Especially if you're me. Everybody knows who I am. I don't know anybody. But everybody knows me! It's kind of a curse and a blessing.

Overall, on a scale of one to ten, what would you say your experience has been opening up Rock City Tattoo?

A ten! I'm open. I can make a living. I do what I want . . . for the most part. The whole part of not making a salary sucks.\

It'd be nice having more business, I bet.

It's not even that. It's the credit cards. They were gone, I'd be much



better off. But it had to be done. I never thought in a million years that I'd be able to open my own shop. And the thing that is cool is I did exactly what I wanted. I didn't have to cut corners. I didn't have to, you know . . . it was exactly what I sort of envisioned. If I was to go to the coolest tattoo shop . . . and that's what I turned it into. If I was on the street, I'd be one of those shops with the street people coming in all the time, which I don't want. And it wouldn't have this vibe. So it sucks that it's in here, and my landlord's a dink. But, at the same time, it's the effect of the whole experience. And I wanted it to be an experience for customers. Not just get in, get out, give us your money. Because that's what the shop was like I worked in before.

Now you're living and working here in downtown Barre. And your new husband's deployed or he's in training?

His name is Walter. Wes Walter. He first came in here he had a really bad cover up on his arm. It sucked! You could totally see the old tattoo. He was really shy. I ended up tattooing his elbow first. He had a lot of traditional tattoos, which people around here don't have. They were really cool. So, I thought, who the hell is this guy?

He's from Indiana. He got accepted at Norwich [University] on a wrestling scholarship. He was like fifth in New England. Then Norwich cut the wrestling program. And he wasn't doing so well there. He kind of hated it. He dropped out. When he enlisted with the [Vermont National] guard, they were like, "You won't deploy." And as soon as he signed up, "You're going to Afghanistan, buddy." He was nineteen! I don't think he had a clue he would be going.

When does he ship out?

Probably, next month. But who knows. It changes all the time. He was going to be a driver. Now he's going to be a gunner. He got screwed.

(Last year, before Wes enlisted, he couldn't find a job in central Vermont, Lila remembers.) Nothing. Nothing! So if it wasn't for this deployment . . . It sucks, but that's the only reason we have good income.

What makes up your community in Barre? Who do you hang out with?

Nobody.

So where do you go for personal hugs and love and affection?

Nowhere.

You're like the lonely girl in Barre.

(Lila doesn't smile.) I go nowhere. I opened this shop, I didn't know I would have to sacrifice my social life and family. People don't come to Barre to hang out. Nobody wants to drive to Barre. I went to the bars down here, maybe twice. And everybody wants to talk to me about the tattoo shop. I mean, it's cool to drum up business. At the same time, I don't want to have too many drinks and piss someone off. Start drama. You know what, I don't really want any friends in Barre. They're going to want free tattoos. I'm very private here. I want to keep my life private. There's even a rumor going around about me now. How can they make rumors about me? I don't do anything. I have two dogs. I come to work, I go home, I take care of the dogs, I eat dinner, I go to bed. I come back to work. Wes is the only outlet I had, and he's gone.

What about other people your age? How are they doing?

People my age I've known for the last ten years are almost all at dead-end jobs. I mean, they live in Burlington. One friend gives people pills for eleven bucks an hour and works insane, retarded hours. My other friend is thirty; he lives in a one-room apartment in Winooski and he roasts coffee down on Pine Street. They're both single. They can't find boyfriends or girlfriends. They can't find rewarding work. I just didn't want to end up like that. I did not want to be thirty years old, or forty years old, going to bars, trying to meet people, working some dead-end job at the mall.

What do you feel is your biggest strength, being intellectual, emotional, or physical?

Maybe intellectual. Because I have to do everything. From tattoos to cleaning to the website to Facebook and MySpace. My advertising. The design of the shop, the build of it. Every single thing I do. With this job, it's more than just technical ability. You have to be able to talk to people while you're hurting them, and have them enjoy their time here. It's kind of a multi-faceted career.

My accountant said, "Don't hire anybody." But when you do that, you take half the money for every tattoo they do. When I'm busy, and the place is full, like it was today, another body is going to help me. But are they going to steal from you? It's a lot of pressure. I don't like to fail. If I fail here, it's ultimately my fault. I can't blame it on somebody else. And that's what freaks me out. I can't say, "My boss sucks!" It's all on me. (She

bends forward and pets her dog, an attentive Doberman pup sitting by her knees, and giggles again.) Hence, me getting married.

What do you know about Vermont history?

The Morgan horse. The Savan Cure in Enosburg. Lake Champlain. In school we'd go to stupid historic crap which totally bored me.

These are my classic Vermont questions: You ever milk a cow?

I could do it. I haven't had to do it. I worked on a farm a little bit.

You ever tap maple trees, make syrup?

Well, my dad does the sugaring. My dad's uncle had a sugarhouse, and we would go up and check the lines. That type of stuff. It was in Jeffersonville.

How about canning, putting food by?

No, but I want to. I had a garden in Winooski. That was pretty good. Now, where I live: A, I don't have the time; B, my yard is shady.

You hunt or fish?

I grew up fishing. I went vegetarian. My dad used to jack deer when I was growing up.

Let's talk about the future. Are you worried about it?

No, I'm not concerned about the future. If the business fails, my plan is to get pregnant. (The highest pitch laugh of our whole session springs from the back of her throat. Finally, she catches her breath.) Isn't that terrible? That's the Barre coming out in me. But I'm getting older. I've only got a few years left to decide.

But it's what they do, they all get pregnant down here. Have their babies. Don't work. And I could do tattoos right out of my house . . . illegally. I figure the economy can't get any worse. It could, but I'm saying no, *and* I can't get any worse at tattooing. I'm only going to get better, get more clients, get better know—that's sort of how it works in this business. I'm wickedly well rounded. Nowadays, if people see, Hey, you have a tattoo shop, they can just click a button and look at your entire portfolio instantly. So I try to stay on the cutting edge of free advertising. I make videos of people with their tattoos. I'm kind of doing guerilla-warfare advertising. I mean, people are never going to stop getting tattoos. I was joking with my aunt about it. I said, "As long as people keep dying and people keep having babies, people are gonna keep getting tattooed." These are two big reasons people get tattooed: their kids's name, people dying.

What would you like to see happen here that might help you out?

The biggest thing I've been griping about is the closing of stores. There is not a grocery store in Barre. I've got to drive ten or fifteen minutes to go to a grocery store. They opened that hippy-dippy Lace place—that agricultural, community exchange thing. I'm sorry, but half the time they don't have anything in there you need. Just *put* a food store in downtown Barre. Even if it's a little market. Shit, someplace I could just walk to and grab a few things and go home. It would create some jobs. Get some of these people off the street. In summer time everybody makes fun of the people with the baby carriages because they don't have anything to do.

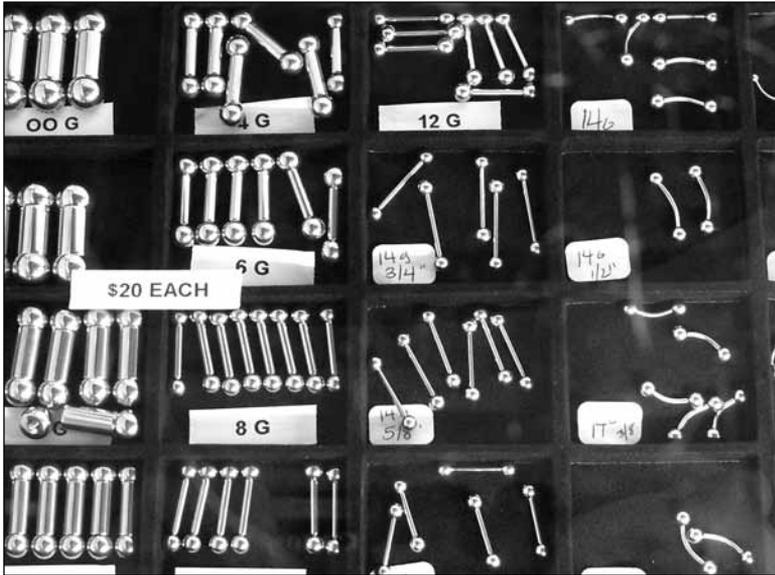
I try to put them to work, man. There's this one kid was comin' in here this summer. I know he has no money. His nineteen-year-old girlfriend already has a toddler, with someone else. She's pregnant with his kid. He wants tattoos! Which is totally insane. I'm like, "Dude, you have no money. So why don't you help us move all my shit to my new house, and I'll give you a free tattoo." So I try to get them off of the street, even though I don't have money to pay them. At least it's giving them something to do other than walk around with the baby stroller and their pit bull. (She shrieks with laughter.) There's no jobs around here! People don't have any extra money. If Barre had more of a downtown, community feeling . . . like Montpelier. There, it's a totally different vibe . . . and it's five miles away. Here it's, like, ugh . . . you know. All we have are two Rent-a-Center places because nobody has any credit. And no grocery store. The whole area is set up so weird.

I mean, just having a grocery store is important. Everything closes at six o'clock here. I don't want to be open until ten o'clock at night. I do cash only. It's only going to take one person to think they're smart and want to rob me. I'm not staying open that late by myself. That's why I've got the dog—even though she would never do anything. And I got a firearm, since I moved to Barre. Yeah, I got a fire arm and my dog. I tattoo a lot of the cops in the area, and the one cop was like, "Don't bring your gun to work. Someone's going to steal it." So I just bring the dog.

Are you at all interested in politics?

I was thinking of running for frickin city council because everybody knows who I am.

Barre has this big thing where they're going to redo the downtown. I go



on the *Times-Argus* website at night. I love the reader's comments. It's like the same ten people, with ass-backwards opinions: Barre's never gonna change! You gotta get the scum off the street! Well, yeah, you got to make jobs. It would help if the state stopped sending all the criminals here, for starters. Kind of spread them out a little bit.

Culturally, when you do have free time, what do you do?

I was younger, I used to go out. I'd get tattoos. A lot of dating was going on. Now I've got the dogs that consume my life. I like to take them for hikes. I'm into cooking. When I had more time I was sewing a lot more. I try to paint and make art and stuff, but that's like a job.

(A long, contemplative pause, during which she rubs her dog's head.) Yeah, I was telling Wes, this job has just sucked me dry so much that when I do have free time, I just sort of veg out.

I need to make four grand a month now to stay open. Nothing crazy. Every day I come to work I hope to make two hundred bucks. Some days I can make seven hundred . . . then go a month and only make a grand. So I have to be here even on my day off.

Final question. Where were you when the decade began? What were you doing?

I remember when the year 2000 came and everybody was afraid about Y2K. I was in Boston. I was nineteen. I had to get out of there. I had this weird feeling. I was selling make-up, and I was starting to look into funeral home directing. I was really intrigued with it, doing make-up, because I was a make-up artist. I said to my mom that summer, “Mom, when you die, can I do your make-up?” Like kidding! And she’s like, “Oh yeah!” And she like died three months later.

I had to go back to Vermont. I packed my shit in a U-Haul, I drove back home. At the same time they had a job opening at Filene’s [in Burlington]. (She’d been working at Filene’s in Boston.) It was a pretty good job for somebody twenty. I did the interview and nailed the job. I got settled in and I sort of reconciled my relationship with my mom, which was really bad for a long time. And all of a sudden, she just died at forty-six years old.

She had Graves Disease. It’s a thyroid condition. She really didn’t tell anybody. She’d gotten real skinny, the doctors wanted to put her on medicine, but it made her fat. She didn’t want to take it. And was working seventy hours a week, opening The Hot Topic in the mall. She flew to LA, which I think was part of it because of the altitude change—she’d had some fluid swelling in her legs . . . they were huge! My mom did not have big legs. In retrospect, I felt really guilty afterwards, like I should have known the symptoms. Her thyroid was over active, her heart was pumping really fast all the time. Basically, she had an enlarged heart from pumping and pumping. What happens is all the fluid collects down there in your legs because your body isn’t circulating it.

I did do her make-up before the funeral. In the twenty years they’d been open, no one had ever done that before at the funeral home. My family was standing there, totally in shock. I can’t believe I did it. I don’t know . . . it was kind of cool. We’d already talked about it, which was sort of creepy. I didn’t think she was going to die.

I had a real bad relationship with my mom. I always said, “Never get a mom tattoo; I hate my mom.” Well, the next day after she died, I was like, I’m going to get a mom tattoo. I went to Body Art and that’s where I met Tyree. I kept getting tattooed by Tyree. After a couple years, he offered me an apprenticeship. I didn’t think I could tattoo. He said, “You want

to learn?” And I said, “No.” (She laughs.) I told him no! Then I started thinking about it, and I’m like, I watch all these people come in with portfolios and artwork, begging for an apprenticeship. I might as well try it. What is the worst that is going to happen?

For me, everything sort of happened the way it was supposed to for ten years. It all sort of worked out. ■