

## Secrets in Ink

Abigail Barefoot

Looking down at the body on the floor sketching intently in his notebook of figures and numbers, unaware of everything going on in her life, she couldn't decide if she wanted him to go away or curl up beside her. The moment her tongue began forming words, her words cracked and lay shattered on the ground as her eyes formed tears that she couldn't easily brush away.

Plop. Plop. She felt the teardrops hit the notebook splashing her words, eventually wrinkling the pages, forever leaving their mark, never to be forgotten.

"Are you okay?" He asked, but he knew she wasn't. He knew she hadn't been okay in a long time. Once upon a time, she could have pretended she was, but she couldn't take it anymore. He didn't touch her or even get up from the grungy carpet, instead he just stared intently at her; his head cocked slightly giving him the appearance of a bird, quizzically waiting for an answer.

She shouldn't be upset with herself; she should be pissed off and wanting to throw things. But she sat there huddled under a blanket, wanting to disappear from the world while feeling defeated.

"Yeah," she muffled as she pulled the blanket up over her head, shielding her face.

"Are you lying?" he asked. His eyes were focused on her, but she could tell his mind was elsewhere, on his own problems that she didn't know. She didn't answer, but crawled onto the floor and put her head on his shoulder. All she wanted was for him to make her feel better, to magically make it all go away.

"I'm just tired that's all," she said. Tired of life, tired of this, tired of not knowing what to do.

He got up and left the room and she let out another sigh. She couldn't describe the feelings in her head, let alone tell him. But it wasn't all her fault; he was always off in his own little world that she couldn't reach no matter how hard she tried. It wasn't like there was a lot holding them together anymore, apart from memories and sex.

"I have an idea," he said coming back in the room clutching a black marker and taking off his shirt. "We are going to write on each others back. A secret that we haven't told each other," he said. She raised her eyebrow at him. It was just another idea, another crazy hope of promising to be better tomorrow, but it would do nothing. Nothing would make the issue go away.

"Then what?" she asked.

"That's all. We'll say all the things we can't say aloud. Then maybe we can eventually talk. Now take off your shirt." She didn't want to take off her shirt. She didn't want to be naked anymore.

"I am not trying to seduce you, at least not yet," he teased. "Take it off."

She pulled her thin tank top over her head. He gently unhooked her bra, leaving her to undo her arms through the holes. It was all done without passion or the feeling of sweet temptation. It was a deeper form of nakedness, looking beyond the lust and actually upon the person. She was vulnerable and didn't like the way his eyes were on her, as if it was the first time he was actually looking at her. She felt like her body, used over and over, had nothing left.

She heard him uncap the marker and wrinkled her nose as the stench of permanent marker wafted to her nose. Grazing her back, he looked for the best place for a message that would never be read. When the marker touched her bare flesh, it caused shivers to crawl up her spine.

"It's cold." She said crossing her arms across her breasts. The marker tickled her skin, and she thought of the ink bleeding into her bloodstream, forever changing her.

"Shhh," he said. His breath lingered on the back of her ear. He was so close to her yet she was unable to touch him. What secrets was he telling? In the end it was his decision to make, but she needed to know what he was thinking. The marker dragged against her skin and she tried to make out the sensations into words but couldn't put together the pieces. His fingertips pressed into her back making the words darker.

She thought about all the possibilities of what he was writing, but she couldn't bring herself to ask. Once she asked, she couldn't live in denial or naivety; she would have to face the facts—whatever they may be.

She took everything he said so seriously—every criticism and act of kindness she took upon herself to try and change. No matter how many times she told herself that it was for the best because he was making her better, she couldn't truly believe it—most of the time she felt a bit desperate at the whole thing. She wanted to please him so much that she was acting on tiptoes, afraid to upset the balance in anyway. This of course led to more fights, but she couldn't change it.

Not wanting to break the magic, she sat in silence. Her heart pounded against her chest, and her stomach, despite her huge lunch, suddenly felt hollow. She had to remind herself that it was just words on her back, but it seemed like so much more. Like the world was hanging in the balance of what he wrote. Her skin was the canvas, for his thoughts, like he was molding

her into something else, just another object to use.

His hand stopped, the marker hovering over her skin looking for any last minute additions. Glancing over her shoulder, she tried to see what he had written, but all that she could see were swirling black lines.

She had to find out what it said, but she wouldn't ask him. She would wait until he was gone and look in the mirror. He couldn't trust her to hear it with her ears, but only use her body to tell his story. She wouldn't ask, to ask would mean to listen to his jumble of words that would never make any sense.

Without a word, he handed her the marker. Suddenly there seemed like too much to say and none of it would fit on his back. All her worries, fears, and secrets were hanging on the tip of the marker. All she need was one phrase, one secret that would make him finally understand her. To break down this tension and rollercoaster of a life, but for all that nothing came to mind.

She traced the scar on his left shoulder; she knew he got it from when he crashed his bike into a tree when he was in middle school. She knew lots of things, she could close her eyes and pinpoint where every freckle was, every birthmark. She knew all these things about him, but she didn't know who he was and she was starting to figure out that maybe he didn't know her as well as she thought.

Gripping the marker, she made her first line on his back. The first contact and she wondered if she would regret it. To write it down would be to admit that it actually happened and to deal with it, something she had been avoiding for awhile.

He didn't say anything, but she liked to believe he knew. He couldn't know what was going on, but he knew. Her secret was anything but a secret, it was written all over her face and in her bottled-up emotions. He knew the truth, even if he would never admit it. He would never change his mind, she would always be waiting for something more. Nothing would change unless she finally spoke up.

Nothing made sense in her mind. She was supposed to be this empowered woman, who didn't fear anything or back down against anyone. So why was she scared of this marker? Why was she so scared of a weird relationship of unreciprocated feelings? There were so many questions she needed answered, but she just couldn't say them out loud.

It no longer mattered what he wrote because for once it was going to be about her. She would make the decision, and it would be what she wanted. No more pleasing someone else's desires, she needed to know that she as a person mattered. It didn't matter if he read her secret, her mind was made

up.

She began writing faster, making the letters darker and more pronounced. She wanted him to feel what she was writing. All the anger and fear she had every night as she went to bed alone, the feelings of being used and taken advantage of.

Finally she was done, she recapped the marker and placed it on the floor. She reread the secret, the wet ink slowly drying like a tattoo on his skin. Gently, she placed a kiss on his shoulder to announce she was done.

"So how do you feel now?" he said, brushing the hair out of her eyes. She started to cry and she wasn't sure if they were tears of joy or sadness at her decision.

She reached for his hand and held it tightly. "I'll be okay," she said. He smiled and reached for his shirt. With his back facing her she read the secret in its lopsided handwriting.

I kept waiting for the day when I would be more than your fuck buddy. Tomorrow I stop waiting.

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**Abigail Barefoot** is a senior in Women's Studies and Journalism. She is currently applying to graduate school with the hope of one day becoming a professor. She has a book on her at all times and is frequently talking about social justice. When she isn't doing activism, she likes to cook and take photos.