

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

Permanent Marker

“In a series of tragedies that would be unbelievable in fiction, everything is broken—Aimee Ross’s marriage, her heart, and finally, her whole body, tooth to toe. A devastating car accident could have been the end of her story, but Ross possesses an indomitable spirit and fierce humor that breathe new life into every page. Clear-eyed and open-hearted, Ross throws open the curtain to her hospital room, revisiting the harrowing, daily details of her trauma and recovery, writing herself to wholeness, and reminding us all of the crucial difference between merely surviving and making a decision to live.”

Jill Christman

Author of *Darkroom* and *Borrowed Babies*:

Apprenticing for Motherhood

“Filled with brutal honesty, heartbreak and humor, Aimee Ross’s gut-wrenching story is an inspiring portrait of strength and resilience. Aimee, a truly gifted, creative and award-winning high school teacher, discovers that it was her students who help her abandon her fears, renew her passion for teaching, and find the joy and meaning in her spared life...sharing a lesson that can help any one of us in our personal or professional life.”

Debra Hurst

2016 National Teachers Hall of Fame Inductee

“Aimee Ross spares no details in her raw, unflinching account of what it means to have your life torn apart—physically and

emotionally. *Permanent Marker* is a remarkable story of healing, courage, and finding the strength it takes to rewrite your life's story."

Tina Neidlein

Humor writer and author of

The Girl's Guide and *It's a Mom Thing*

"Aimee Ross sees the patterns of literature weaving through life. So when she is slammed with catastrophes that shatter her body and threaten her soul, she finds signposts to recovery through foreshadowing, symbols and yes, irony—which makes hers not just a resurrection story, but one laced with laughs."

Jan Shoemaker

Author of *Flesh and Stones: Field Notes from a Finite World*

PERMANENT MARKER

A Memoir



AIMEE ROSS

THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF

It should not be quoted without comparison with the finished book.

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A version of “August 2012” first appeared as the essay “Permanent Marker” in *Scars: An Anthology* (Wood, Et Alia Press, 2015).

A version of part of “March-May 2010” first appeared as the essay “Crossing” on SixHens.com (Issue 4).

Cover and book design by Mark Sullivan

ISBN 978-0-9991581-0-4 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-9991581-1-1 (e-book)

Printed in the United States of America

Published by KiCam Projects

www.KiCamProjects.com

Introduction

The Trifecta of Shit.

That's how I like to refer to it.

The end of my marriage. My own heart attack. An under-the-influence driver on a collision course to destroy the life I had just started to rebuild.

And all within six months.

The Triple Crown. A trio. Isn't the third time the charm?

Heart, body, soul: I was marked.

But I couldn't let—scratch that—I *wouldn't* let the Trifecta define my life.

August 2012

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I stood naked on a wooden box in the meat-locker cold of the plastic surgery prep room, where two nurses watched as the surgeon marked up my body with a black Sharpie.

He sat on a wheeled stool, eye level with my abdomen, leaning forward, drawing slowly. He paused, rolled backward with his heels, and took in the surgical map of my front in its entirety.

I was freezing, and self-consciously I wondered if he had noticed my nipples, erect from the cold. If he had, he wasn't showing it. Instead, he moved forward again and resumed the process of grabbing skin, charting lines, and scrutinizing the results. He was taking his time, but it was okay. I wanted him to go slowly. I wanted him to make sure the markings were perfectly placed.

In just minutes, he would be cutting those lines and "revising" the scar that ran the length of my torso—the scar made to save my life two years before.

Actually, I had more than ten scars all over my body from that night. Places where bones punctured skin, where chest tubes inflated lungs. Where a seatbelt held me fast. Where crushed, sharp metal scored skin. Where an eight-inch plate braced a snapped humerus and a three-inch pin secured a fractured pelvis. Where wires and screws held a dislocated foot in place. Where IVs found the perfect veins to tap.

Some of the scars were short, some were long, some were hard to see—but almost all of them were vertical.

At right angles to a horizontal plane. Perpendicular. The same angle at which we collided when he ran that stop sign and into my car, T-boning it and me. My vertical scars, the places I was put back together, stitched back up.

And none of them compared to the disfiguring scar running up and down my abdomen. The scar I worried people could see through my clothing. The scar that hurt to the touch.

I hated this fucking scar.

“Should I try to save your belly button?” the surgeon asked as he pulled the permanent marker away from my flesh and looked up just long enough to speak.

I was surprised by the option. No one would even consider it a navel as it was, smashed up and pushed away from its point of origin.

“No, it’s okay.”

Two years before, trauma doctors had not asked me what to save. They had not planned the carved path their knives would take, nor did they plot the route around my belly button. They were trying to save my life. They just cut.

“We had to have them do *that*,” my brother once said, pointing to my abdomen, “to be able to have you here now.”

That.

I could almost picture *it*. Me, unconscious and naked, blue paper medical drapes covering legs and arms, breasts and belly exposed. Me, flat on a stainless-steel table in a cold operating room, where white lights radiate and whispery instructions intensify. A quick surgical cut, the flash of blade piercing flesh, just above the sternum down, down, down around the umbilicus, down still farther to the pubis.

Done. That quick. A way to get inside.

Internal bleeding, lacerated organs, a ruptured spleen. My body was left open for the bleeding to stop and the swelling to lessen. Then there was closure of muscle tissue only, with a wound vac in place until the outside could be surgically closed.

But I didn't want *that* surgery, yet another, so the vacuum stayed in—for almost three months. Maybe I should have gone back under the knife. Maybe it was my fault.

This monstrous scar, gaping, was still tender two years later. I thought about the accident every time I got dressed. I cried every time I saw myself naked.

Doctors assured me the wound would grow together on its own, but no one could tell me what it would look like. I imagined a normal, smooth surgical scar. Surely, I believed, since they had cut me straight, my belly would mend together that way, too.

I was wrong.

When the skin of my abdomen finally had closed three months later, a messy, uneven, and ugly scar ran its length: a ten-inch-long ribbon undulated from just above my ribcage to just above my pubic bone. Thick, new pink skin stretched wide like a yawn, bridging the fingertip-deep crevice to smooth the fault line of my abdomen's landscape. The ruched tissue puckered in places and pulled in others, dividing my stomach, splitting subcutaneous fat, then narrowed to semi-thick closures at both ends.

Wow—such a poetic description, Aimee. And what bullshit.

The scar made me look as if I had another ass, but this one was in front. I still had my belly button, but it was scrunched up and pushed to the side, forgotten. The entire area still hurt to the touch because the tissue of my abdomen had been so deeply bruised. My

clothes even fit differently. I shopped for maternity tops—twelve years after my last child was born.

I fucking hated it.

The plastic surgeon drew huge circles on my flanks, what he called the areas of skin just under the ribs above the waist, where he would also perform liposuction. Then he traced dotted vertical lines around the scar and around my smashed-up navel, along with another line, horizontal this time, from hipbone to hipbone.

I knew this was for the tummy tuck—another scar to add to the canvas.

When he finished with his magic marker, I stepped down from the box, turned, and looked in the mirror, avoiding his and the nurses' eyes. I had never been completely naked in front of this many people before—at least not awake—and with each minute that passed in the cold, I became more embarrassed by my nudity. All of my flaws had been highlighted by a map of black ink stretching across the flesh of my abdomen, and somehow, I understood this strange picture. The skin around my scar would be cut away, the rest pulled together, smoothed tight, and stitched closed. The “disfigurement” a psychologist had once noted would be corrected, the excess fat and extra skin discarded.

“Okay,” the surgeon said, tucking the pen into his pocket and slapping the palms of his hands on his thighs. “It’s time! I’ll see you when you wake up.”

He looked up and smiled.

“You’ll be great, Aimee,” he reassured me, and I knew in that moment that he was the one who would be great, not me.

Nonetheless, it *was* time.

Emergency | Tuesday, July 27, 2010, 9:13 p.m.

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Two headlights in my left periphery. No time to react. An almost instantaneous blow, vehicle against vehicle. And then it all went black.

Or did it? I couldn't remember. *Time passed*, I thought.

How long?

Was that someone screaming? She's screaming at me. I raised my head and looked over at her. She asked if I was okay. I couldn't answer. I didn't know.

What I did know was that my front tooth had been knocked out. Cool air filled the gap that once held what I now felt laying on my tongue. It seemed much smaller than a front tooth should.

Who was that beside me, talking through the window?

"Ma'am, can you hear me?" someone asked. "Are you okay?"

I lifted my head to answer him.

I don't know, I wanted to say, but nothing came out. I didn't know if I was okay, and my mouth wouldn't form words. My brain wouldn't let my voice respond. *Why couldn't I talk?*

"Ma'am?"

I knew there had been an accident that warm July evening. I knew I was driving. And I knew my front tooth was gone.

Jagged pieces of something white were coming out of my leg. Or was it my foot?

I could see it from the twisted angle of my seat. Bones coming through skin. Blood. Oh my God.

The girls. I had three members of the high school dance team I coached in the car with me. *Were they okay?*

“Who is this?” the voice outside the car asked.

Jorden answered behind me.

“That’s Aimee Young. She’s a teacher at Loudonville High School,” she screamed. “She’s had a heart attack before!”

She sounded frantic, but somehow I felt relief.

Where was Emily? She had been right beside me in the front passenger seat, but she wasn’t now. *And what about Sarah?* She was sitting behind Emily. *Did she get out okay?*

Two silhouettes. One beside me, the other behind him. They wanted to free me from the wreckage. Two arms reached inside my window, and I attempted to move my body to help, twisting my left shoulder toward the open window and whoever it was.

And then I heard a voice from inside the car.

“Stop moving or you are going to die.”

Who was it? Who said that?

I stopped moving.

I understood.

This was bad. Really bad.

They lifted me out of the wreckage and onto some kind of board. A large, white sheet was draped over the back window where Jorden had been.

Was she out of the car, too? Or were they going to get her?

Flat on my back. The night sky. A zillion stars. A head moved over my face like a shadow. Kenny, once my husband of eighteen years and now my ex-husband of one month.

What’s he doing here? How did he know?

“Aimee, you’ll be okay,” he said. “I love you.”

We had known each other since we were both seventeen, and his voice was familiar and comforting, but I couldn't answer him. I still couldn't speak. If he was saying I'd be okay, I must have looked okay. *Did he see that my front tooth is missing?* And just as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone.

They were wheeling me somewhere, but I couldn't tell where I was. *Inside? A hallway?* Everything was happening so quickly—*a hospital?* Someone leaned in and told me she loved me. *Natalie.* She had been in another car—*behind us? Had she seen it happen?* I thought she was crying.

They were moving me again, through doors—*outside?* There was a helicopter waiting—*for me?* It was so loud. I thought the back was open. That was where they were taking me? They pushed me in, still lying flat, and I had the immediate sensation that we were lifting off. *But wait—was the back still open? What if I fell out?*

Then everything went black.