

*First appeared in Literal Latte, Fall, 2012*

## **Amanda's Violin**

by Judy Fort Brenneman

The round table at the coffee shop is covered with a dark green and tan cloth. The four chairs fill its arc on the side away from the wall. I'm on one end of the arc; my backpack and a white teddy bear named Snowball fill the next two chairs; and Amanda, a slight, elven-faced girl-child of ten, sits in the fourth chair. A chess board made from a slice of tree trunk weights down the table between us, angled so that both the bear and Amanda have a good view.

Amanda drinks cocoa with whipped cream, I drink tea, and we play checkers, because I don't know how to play chess and because we can complete a game of checkers in twenty minutes. Amanda's school is only four blocks from my son's school but starts thirty minutes later, so we fill the time between dropping off Kyle and delivering Amanda with blue mugs of steaming warmth and checkers.

Today, Amanda keeps her light blue polyester coat on, protection against the blast of cold that hits us every time a customer opens the unshielded back door. Her shoulders are hunched and rounded, her blue eyes wide and serious. She doesn't look at her bear or ask it advice, though she does occasionally point out jumps that I've missed. I don't try to lose, but I do sometimes anyway.

On the drive over, Amanda asked from the distant back seat of the van, "Do you know what happened two days ago?"

Briefly, I consider feigning ignorance, which might give her more opportunity to talk, but decide open acknowledgement is better; more honest and less patronizing.

"I know your dad died in a car accident on Saturday," I say matter-of-factly.

"Uh-huh, we're going to go to his apartment and get his cat today," comes her soft sing-songy reply. "His name is Gray."

Her father is—was—in his seventies. Amanda has not lived with him since she was a preschooler, when her mother discovered that he was molesting her. Her mother packed the two children, Amanda and her older brother, into their well-worn van and left, not knowing where they would go or how they would live.

Eventually, they sorted it out as best as anyone could in this world: Amanda's mother got custody and no financial support, not even the security of a life insurance policy; he got limited, supervised visitation.

We always assumed he would die of old age. He was older than Amanda's maternal grandparents by nearly a decade. Amanda's mother was very young, very naive, when she married; she didn't realize until much later that she was part of a long-standing pattern.

Amanda—small, frail-looking, but stronger than she lets most people know—has spent the intervening years trying to figure out her relationship with a man who is and is not her father. She considers herself to be fatherless—neither her biological father nor her mother's new husband fulfill her internal, undisclosed definition of "father"—and she has spent much time and thought trying to solve the puzzle of relating to a man she knows is not trustworthy or what a father should be.

Can that end now?

No, of course not, or at least not likely.

Amanda's mother is a tutor for the school district, and we've been friends since she began tutoring my son several years ago. It was one of those "instant friendships," when you know from the moment you meet that you're going to be friends. It was only a few months after we met that she told me about Amanda's father, and then she asked if someday would it be all right if Amanda talked to me about it, because of my experience.

Amanda and I both play violin. In Amanda's school, all the children play a stringed instrument as part of their regular school work.

I began violin in the fifth grade, using an old three-quarter-size violin that passed from my mother to her much younger cousins and then to me. Like Amanda's, my violin was held secure in a black case that felt like heavy cardboard or thin, soft, almost-wood. The black handle was wrapped with electrician's tape, slightly sticky where the edges overlapped. Amanda's case is new and has a matching shoulder strap that she loops across her chest like a bandolier.

When I was older, larger, in seventh or eighth grade, I switched from the three-quarter-size violin to my father's full-size violin, an instrument that could sing on its own. Glued inside, on the back so you could read it if you peered through an F hole, was a bit of brown paper that claimed it was after the form of Stradivarius, made in 1716 in Cremona. Family legend has it that the instrument was passed down through the generations, finally landing with my father as he played in his high school orchestra and, during his senior year, with the local symphony of our small Ohio town.

Amanda brings her violin to school on Thursdays, but I have never heard her play. I rarely play any more, though from time to time, I take the instrument from the black plastic case

that replaced my father's much-taped cardboard one and dust off faint rosin smudges under the strings between the fingerboard and bridge, run my fingers along the curves, trace the F holes, peek through to see that the small piece of paper with the magic word, *Stradivarius*, is securely attached.

My father's violin isn't perfect, hasn't been for a long time, though that isn't why I don't play it. Two long scars, invisible unless you know where to look, run parallel to the fingerboard. They are repaired cracks.

One morning when I was sixteen, I stood by the side door watching for the school bus. The violin was in its case, like it was every morning. Like most mornings, I put the case on the floor and stood on it, on tiptoe, to get a better view. If I saw the bus as it reached the house two doors down, I would have plenty of time to walk to the end of the drive; if I didn't see it until it stopped at the house next door, I'd have to sprint, and I was an awkward runner, made more so by the boxy case.

That day, and no day before, there was a tiny sound, for just the briefest moment as I stood on the case, and even though the bus wasn't there, I gathered my things and ran for the end of the drive.

Later, I lied to my mother and said I didn't know what had happened, and later still, more practiced, pled ignorance to my father. I even convinced myself that I didn't know, and I really didn't know for sure; after all, I hadn't seen the damage until hours later, in orchestra class, poking the stub of my chewed fingernail along the strip of exposed splinters.

Amanda has never asked me about my violin, though I think she knows I have one; she's never asked me to play, or to help her with her music. During Thursday checkers games, her violin rests in the car, cold and secure, while we sip our cocoa and tea.

Because of my father's violin, I was a good violinist. A shadow of my fingertip bisecting a string would send harmonics floating through the room where I practiced, notes that built on and under and around each other. Firmer pressure on fatter strings bellowed out melodies, never harmonies; I was always first chair, first violin, until my senior year, when a girl who took private lessons every week moved to our district. She practiced four or more hours every day. I practiced intermittently and ineffectually; no one had taught me how, though I'm not sure it would have mattered.

Preparing for state competitions and a seat in the state orchestra, I sawed back and forth, never memorizing the music, but able to read quickly enough and move my hands to the required positions precisely enough that the strength of the instrument carried me to second place, every time, and guaranteed a seat, usually somewhere in the back with students from other rural schools, in the state orchestra.

During such times, my father would amble into the practice room, peer over my shoulder at the music, slide his hand along my arm that supported the neck of the violin, stroke the

side of my wrist or my thumb, pretend to adjust my position, to fine-tune my finger placement.

I imagine, in retrospect, the smell of tobacco on his breath, though I am sure I did not smell it then; only later, after living in smoke-free apartments with nonsmoking friends was I able to recognize the smell of tobacco smoke.

In memory, not imagination, I feel his breath on the back of my neck, know that his lips, his teeth, are mere inches from the nape of my neck, and that it is only by focusing on the music very hard, holding my breath for as long as possible, by agreeing with his critiquing, his comments that he says to demonstrate, to prove, to pretend that this is a lesson, pretending that these comments are why he stands here, behind me, his breath and gravely voice that slides toward a softer huskiness that I recognize but don't identify until nearly thirty years later, it is only by this tension that I am able to stay sitting in the metal folding chair.

\*\*\*\*

When Amanda first introduced me to Snowball, she explained that he came from a special store where you picked the one you wanted, and they stuffed and sewed it right there.

The next day, Snowball was replaced by a floppy-eared dog, and by smaller stuffed creatures in the days after that, all with names, all getting a turn beside the checkerboard. After a week or two, Snowball reappeared, perhaps because we were at the beginning of the list again, or perhaps because Snowball now wore a bright blue vest with white trim and a blue cap tied on at a jaunty angle.

The clothes, Amanda explained, were from the same shop; some you could buy when you went there, some were special and had to be ordered through a catalog. It sounded like the clothes were ready-made, not sewn on-site like the bear itself, but Amanda wasn't clear about the details, or at least wasn't clear enough to explain the process to me.

Her father's memorial service was held the Friday after he died, the end of the week when Amanda first brought Snowball. I went, partly in support of Amanda, but mostly in support of Amanda's mother. Amanda and her brother sat in the front row, between their mother's parents, at the opposite end of the pew from their father's recent fiancée.

Amanda's mother and stepfather, their new baby, and I sat in the last row, on the same side as Amanda, watching the minister recite words and verses that could have applied to anyone. The funeral equivalent to mass market horoscopes, I thought to myself. The words meant to offer comfort with their promise of heaven dropped from the microphone to the floor, some quirk of acoustics removing what little warmth they might have held. An older woman in an outdated beige suit and a small hat sat at the organ, peered at the sheet music, and earnestly played the opening to Hymn 52, while the audience stumbled to its feet and felt its way into the first verse. A quick glance at the photocopied program

confirmed the page number but not the number of verses; there were six, and we sang them all.

A distant nephew, the only out-of-town relative to attend the service, stood at the podium and told three disconnected stories about his uncle, stories that were devoid of emotion, stories that revealed nothing about himself, sweating and awkward at the microphone, or about the man he professed to eulogize.

The pillbox hat behind the organ wobbled and the minister signalled us to rise; as the intro to Hymn 17 finished, we began singing at the same time. Six verses again, with two codas, and an impossible rhythm on the third and fourth lines that quickly turned itself into quarter notes.

The fiancée came to the podium, clutching tissues and a folded piece of white paper. She was middle-aged, thick about the waist without being fat; sturdy legs and sensible shoes, a pale yellow calico shirtdress, tiny flower clusters fading into the pastel background, a pale belt meant to match but off just slightly; faded brown hair modestly short, styled close to her head; a brief glint from a small gold cross on a short chain. My instant reaction or perhaps personal prejudice: if she were Catholic, she would have been a nun, a pious but not particularly good nun.

She dabbed the corner of each eye, sniffed softly, and unfolded the paper.

She was the only person visibly upset; I expected to hear something of her loss, her love, and her great shock and sorrow. I would not have been surprised to hear her read a poem or a Bible verse, someone else's words that were comforting to her, words that she would offer as comfort to us as we sat silent in the pews.

But there were no stories, no accolades about what a good man he'd been or how wonderful their time together had been; nothing to reveal who she was or what the death meant to her; no poetry or quotes, no mention of the head-on collision that was judged not his fault. Just three sentences, delivered the way your third-grade teacher would tell you about an interesting tidbit in science: she knew him for such a short time; she was relieved to have brought him back to the church; she knew he would go to heaven. I suppose it was the best she could do.

One last hymn, eight verses, four sharps, with occasional flats strewn through the measures, but at least it was 4/4 time with steady quarter notes.

On the day that Amanda brought a curly-furred rabbit wearing a checked bow-tie, I asked what she thought of the service. She cocked her head to one side and fiddled with the white plastic marker, then shrugged, moved the marker to the next square, and said, "It was O.K. I liked the lemonade."

When I first left home for college, I left my father's violin, too. It stayed untouched, on top of the old upright piano in the practice room. When I came home for Christmas on my college break, it was already covered with random papers and junk mail.

My junior year, under the influence of a classical guitarist and a Croatian folk-singer, I learned to play the alto recorder. Aside from a tendency to bite the mouthpiece—a habit I have never been able to break—I did all right, quickly learning folk songs and a few baroque pieces. When my friends marveled, I suggested that it wasn't too hard since I already knew how to read music. "Violin," I told them. "I don't play any more."

By Christmas, they'd convinced me that I had to bring the violin to school, had to play again, had to demonstrate my talent and ability. I let their enthusiasm override my protests and retrieved the violin from under the papers, found faded mimeographs of high school sheet music and a lesson book or two, and set up practice in the basement of the fraternity house where the Croatian and the guitarist lived.

By summer, most of the fingering had come back and I could tune by ear again. By fall, I'd discovered a preference for Hungarian Gypsy music—it seemed to fit with Croatian folk-songs—and I bought my first sheet music, not mimeographs, but heavy white paper thick with the fury of dark-haired women dancing in firelight, their long woven skirts snapping and billowing as their feet struck the dust in frenzied unison, tambourines and gold bracelets cascading through page after page of sixteenth notes.

\*\*\*\*

"Fatty, fatty, fatty." My father leers at me and laughs. My face flushes red, shame overridden by anger. My mother continues rinsing dishes in the sink, her back to us. I am trying to reach the garage, on the other side of the kitchen. A half-empty cup of black coffee sits on the table near my father's elbow; the smoke from his cigarette mingles with the smells of coffee and soap.

He stretches his legs out so that I have to step over them to reach the door. I stumble past, fleeing, his taunts following me out the door, his laugh and a last "Fatty!" muffled only slightly as the door thumps closed.

The truth is, I don't know if I'm fat. I have no concept of my body, no idea of how it looks or what it should look like.

There are two mirrors in our house. The bathroom mirror is above the sink. If I stand on the edge of the bathtub, I can see most of my body, from about mid-knee to head, but it's a precarious perch and doesn't lend itself to careful inspection.

The other mirror, framed in dark walnut, is fastened to my mother's dresser. It's hard to see anything in it, and it cuts off the top of my head.

Once, when I was very young—about Amanda's age, I think—my sisters and I were playing in front of the dresser. We had just finished our bath and were supposed to be getting into our nightgowns while Mom gave my two younger brothers their bath.

My father watched us from the doorway, then told us our posture needed to be better. "Stand up straight, don't slouch; turn this way, you can see in the mirror, your shoulders should be back, like this." His voice was calm, almost fluid, as he pointed at us, occasionally poking me between my bare shoulder blades or in the small of my back, cupping my shoulders in his hands and pushing gently. Looking back, I wonder if this was when it really started.

I remember what my body looked like then, in the mirror; I could see all of it, long-limbed, flat-chested, faint waves of ribs, lean.

\*\*\*\*

At the memorial service for Amanda's father, the minister clasped the podium and leaned into the microphone. His voice was almost deep, not quite resonant, with an occasional twang that hinted of Oklahoma or the Texas panhandle.

The minister told us that the deceased had loved Amanda and her brother. Amanda's mother and I exchanged glances. He knew this, the minister said, because it was his understanding that a trust fund had been set up for the children. Amanda's stepfather crumpled his program into his fist with one sudden movement and threw the program on the floor.

The nephew echoed the minister's sentiments: their father had loved them, and his only regret was that he couldn't spend more time with them, the nephew said, looking over Amanda's head toward the center of the congregation. I knew he said these things to reassure Amanda and her brother, I knew that he did not hear the double meaning the words held, but I felt myself fill with anger and disgust for this distant nephew and the ignorant minister and the sea of carefully composed faces.

My father died in his sleep, in the early morning, while my mother fixed breakfast in the kitchen.

My sisters and I went through photographs, unsorted and mostly unlabeled, culling snapshots for a memory board. In one photo, he is a blonde teenager, wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses and holding his violin. His left hand wraps lightly around the neck of the violin, holding it upright, the other end resting on his left thigh; *second position*, my orchestra teacher always called it. I inherited both his nearsightedness and his square jaw. During calling hours at the funeral home, people who had never met me recognized me as the Colorado daughter, the one who moved away.

I eavesdropped near the memory boards. The stories were about boats and sailing trips, about rebuilt engines and business deals, about backyard cookouts and boy scout

potlucks. The stories glided past the photo of the teenager holding the violin, as if it weren't there.

There was one memory board at the memorial service for Amanda's father, propped on an easel outside one of the sanctuary doors. A handful of photographs, none recent but none from his childhood, had been glued to the lightweight posterboard.

The minister finished the benediction and the organist began the postlude. People drifted into the center aisle as the fiancée, leaning slightly on the arm of another woman, led the way. Amanda and her brother were soon lost in her wake, surrounded like small stones in a slow-moving river.

As the front of the sanctuary emptied, I noticed that there was a table on the raised platform behind the podium. It was covered with a white cloth. There were no symbols on it. A dozen white candles, long, elegant tapers, stood in tall glass columns of dark blue, green, and burgundy. The candles weren't lit. There were no flowers.

In competitions, I always came in second, never first, because part way through—never at the beginning and I always recovered by the end—my fingers would lose their place and stumble on the fingerboard. The first time I successfully made it through a solo was my senior year Christmas concert. I had three interspersed solos in the opening piece. I fumbled the first and was so angry that I ripped through the second with a ferocity and accuracy I'd never known before.

Anger drove every performance after that, though my orchestra teacher called it determination. The classical guitarist envied my lack of stage fright. The Croatian folk-singer mistook it for passion.

I spoke at my father's memorial service without the podium. I had no stage fright, and the audience heard passion.

I have moved nine times since college. In my first apartment, I stored the violin on the closet floor. In the second, I stored the violin under the bed. I dusted the case before each move, but never opened it.

I married a man who had played piccolo in high school marching band because a piccolo is small enough to carry in your shirt pocket, like a pen.

Now, the violin rests in its case on top of an oak bookcase in our guest room. I think I should play it; I've read that the best violins get better with playing and that some artists pay thousands of dollars to use such instruments.

My father gently placed the violin case on the table and snapped open the lid. The violin—smooth, polished wood, perfect grain pattern—trembled slightly in the hollow of the red velvet lining.

The man who owns the music shop has repaired the cracks, but says the repair can be done only once. "He said something heavy must have been put on top of the case," my father tells me. "If you let it happen again, he won't be able to fix it."

Late that night, my father's heavy body pushed into mine, his fingers digging into the flesh of my hips, my breasts, the places where I am fat. If I weren't fat, I wouldn't have broken his violin. But I'm not fat. But I must be: the violin proves it.

I feel sorry for the violin. I didn't mean to hurt it. Deep inside, I can admit that it was my fault—but not to my father.

Never to my father.

In February, the table cloth is bright red in honor of Valentine's Day, and Amanda asks if I'd like to come to her school concert. A small bean-bag gecko watches impassively as I slide a black plastic marker out of the way before Amanda can jump it.

"Of course I'll be there," I smile. Amanda smiles and jumps two other markers; I'd forgotten that kings can move both directions.

Amanda's mother says that Amanda faked her entire performance at last year's concert. It was a good performance, but Amanda's bow never touched the strings.

When she was young, Amanda could sing back, matching note for note, tone for tone, any song she heard. She probably inherited this ability from her father, an excellent pianist who never learned to read music.

Amanda's ability disappeared the day she told her father that he *had* molested her, she knew it, and it wasn't something that either she or her mother made up, it wasn't her fault, and he should quit lying. She was six years old.

Amanda's mother and I wave as she takes her seat in front of the small audience. She smiles, and I give her a thumbs-up.

There are sixteen children, all with violins. They sit two by two, sharing music stands, fanning out to the left and right. Amanda is in the last row on the right, in the chair closest to the audience.

The teacher welcomes us and turns to the students, who lift their violins upright, to second position, except for one little boy who is looking at the audience, not the teacher. The teacher waits until he, too, is ready, then lifts her right hand slightly. The violins are now tucked under chins, bows poised above the strings: ready position. I feel more than see the teacher's tiny hand count—one, two, three, four—and when she drops her hand for the downbeat, the bows drop. Amanda's bow draws solidly, confidently, across the open string, returning and drawing as her fingers march up and down in rhythm.

\*\*\*\*

### *Coda*

I want to tell you that I'm going to play violin again, that I'll turn the mother-of-pearl cylinder that tightens the bow's horsehair, fit the taut horsehair into the groove in the block of rosin worn deep from generations of practice and performance. I want to let you know that I can still play, that all it takes is a little practice, and that tomorrow or the day after that, I'll tuck the black cup of the chin rest into the hollow of my shoulder, draw the bow firmly across freshly tuned strings, and feel the vibration resonate through the wood and into my collarbone, the joint of my shoulder, my sternum and spine. I want to tell you that I'll draw the bow back and forth, not sawing but singing, soft and smooth here, raucous there, a sharp accent or double-string chord or a sprinkling of pizzicato punctuating melody lines, harmony lines. I want to tell you that I'll dig the bow into the lowest string, a sharp tug near the frog, the part of the bow closest to my hand, making the rosin roil up in tiny swirling puffs as the string shakes itself free of sounds; that I'll place my left pinky finger on the exact center of the highest string, the E string, and draw the bow, tilted on its edge so only the barest whisper of horsehair strokes the string, and watch while the harmonics climb on top of each other, tone upon tone, octave upon octave, the notes anchored to the string by my finger, the string anchored to the bow by the rosin, everything anchored to the smooth wood of the violin and the security of my shoulder and jawline pressing the chin rest from opposite sides.

But that is the same as promising I'll play, and I won't—won't promise, won't play, won't even practice. My life is too full, too busy, to do more than occasionally open the case; in this, I am no different from any other woman, except perhaps in my awareness that I have made a choice.

But this I can, and do, promise: I will sip tea and play checkers, and I will listen to Amanda and her violin.

####