

Violin strains made in heaven

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was many years ago. My father had just passed away. In the divvying up of his possessions, there was only a few bits and pieces I really wanted. Dad's violin was one of them.

Though he played it rarely in his later years, he cherished the thought of it. Often pulling it out, stroking it, fondling it. Tears would well in his eyes as the memories would flood back. Memories of his own father playing the beautifully crafted instrument. Of his childhood, sitting in front of a harsh European teacher as he struggled to produce the magical voice his father could tease out.

Our home was always full of the sound of violin concertos those early years of my life, pouring out of the record player with such passion. And not just classical violin, but violin in all its eclectic forms, fast, slow, the Irish fiddle, the exotic sound of Middle Eastern fiddle, central European, folksy or bluegrass violin.

Eventually my father abandoned his violin, preferring the trendier guitar instead. Or maybe the pain of his grief was just too great. He had never recovered from the loss of his father, who died too young.

And when my own dad died, too young, I flew down to bury him, and to take back with me the thing that most reminded me of him.

Everyone else wanted to keep his guitar. But I wanted that sacred wooden thing, so vulnerable, so fragile and filled with emotion. I wanted to protect it, clinging to it on the plane and wrapping my body around the case.

But what do you do with a man's soul?

Once home I put it lovingly in our storage room, opened the windows for ventilation, and placed a large, smiling photo of my dad on top. I tended the case, dusting it regularly. The one thing I never did, could never do, was open that case and take the violin out.

Though I promised my daughter I'd give her lessons, each time she approached the instrument I would make some excuse and walk away.

It was as if, by opening the case, I would open Pandora's box. I was afraid that all the pain and loss of missing him would swamp me like a tidal wave, and all his grief would hit me too. For I believe energy continues to exist in objects long after the owners have gone, reaching out, touching, engulfing.

I often thought about learning to play it. But would retreat. For if opening the case would cause such sadness, then what of the crying from the instrument itself, hand-made in Russia for my great grandfather, carried through generations of Jewish persecution and pogroms, thrown out of one country to the next, displaced and homeless until finally reaching the safety of Australia?

Like my father, I too fell in love with the violin. So it was an amazing gift to find myself recently at the annual Woodford Folk Festival in Queensland, which

attracts many of the world's finest, bathing us in fast and furious Celtic, Gaelic, Klezmer, Gypsy or electric/rock violin.

But on the last day, during one concert, when a group of the best violinists and fiddlers in the world had gathered onstage to perform wild fusion, the passion in my heart became too great and I suddenly felt the tears rolling from my eyes.

"Dad ... dad ..." I whispered to myself, heartbroken that he couldn't be there to witness the pleasure of it all. For do we ever recover from our losses?

I imagined the notes reaching him wherever he was, and I let them take me to his soul, and I told him how much I missed him. "Come visit me some time, dad," I said to the ghost I hoped was there.

That night a very mysterious thing happened. We had arrived home from days of camping and I was utterly exhausted. While unpacking, and preparing dinner, a stranger came to our door.

She said she'd been at Woodford and had decided to drop in to Byron Bay on her way back to Sydney to visit the man we had house-sitting while we were away. Standing in the kitchen, while I chopped vegetables, she told me that she was a fiddler and had been blown away by the incredible violinists at Woodford. "I wish I had my violin here now, I would love to play!" she said.

"Hey, Ruth has a violin. I've seen it in the store room," said my house-sitter enthusiastically.

"I'd love to see it," she said. "I'll go get it," said my house-sitter. And before I had a chance to stop him, the instrument was being put on the table and opened by the stranger.

"Oh ... it's very old. I love old instruments," she said, lifting the violin and fondling it gently. "I'll get my mandolin and we can tune it," said my house-sitter who plays in a local band.

I wanted to protest. Wanted to stop them. But she was twanging in tune with his mandolin, and before I had even caught my breath, the bow began grazing the strings and my dad's violin began singing to me.

"It's beautiful," she sighed. My husband stood beside me squeezing my hand as I fought back the tears.

And suddenly they were off together. My house-guest playing frenetic mandolin, and she in some altered state of fiddling. Notes soared wildly into the spaces between us as dinner simmered on the stove. The violin was singing in pure joy. There was none of the sadness of loss I feared. Rather the delight of being found.

And I knew dad was there. In the room. In the sounds, mystical and profound. In the beauty. In the love pouring out of that woman's heart. He had heard my prayer. It was too coincidental that the stranger had come.

She stopped playing and put the instrument lovingly in my arms. I let the bow run over the strings. I let go a few tears, because I too had found something I'd lost.

"Mummy, will you teach me?" said my little girl, doing some Celtic jig round the room. "Yes," I smiled at her.

"I'll learn too. We'll learn together," I said, as the stranger took off again with the duelling mandolin, and I left them playing madly while I went to get dinner ready, and to contemplate the unseen magic that lies beneath the surface of day-to-day life.

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