

Amanda Away

It's a quiet Sunday evening. The dishes being cleaned after dinner. The one note cat, asking for the sliding door to the porch to be opened. The clunk, bang, crash of a thirteen year old, with more size and strength than he realizes, making his way around the house.

But it's the sounds that are missing I hear the most. Amanda is off at Camp Conestoga as a counselor in training. Last summer, we worked together a good number of weekends on her Silver Project at Conestoga, building a stage in a small clearing in the woods. The stage will be there for years, a lasting reminder of her good intentions and our combined carpentry. Young Girl Scouts, perhaps away from home for the first time, will forget they are homesick as they join under the canopy of trees for a night of fun. For summers on end, the woods will be filled with the high-pitched laughter of a gaggle of girls, performing on, and gathered around, the stage Amanda built.

It's a small consolation, for the quiet at home foreshadows what I've been preparing for since she was not yet a week old. Of all the true stories I tell, this is among the truest. Amanda was born just before Christmas. She had a slight fever at birth, and spent the first few days in the neonatal ward. Everything turned out fine, but I'll never forget the nights of nervously, delicately, rocking her to sleep in the wee hours, as "Silent Night" played softly in a technology packed room of struggling newborns. If you ever lack for faith in humanity, or put any stock in the ridiculous labels that separate us as humans, spend a night in a neonatal ward. There is nothing but love there; anxious, hopeful and transformative.

A few days later, the on-ramp to Highway 53 off Euclid Road in Arlington Heights would have been utterly forgettable, except for a moment's glance back in the rear view mirror, to Marcia tending Amanda, firmly bound in the car seat heading home from the hospital. Marcia catches my eye and wonders, aloud, what I'm thinking. Perhaps a little punchy from several nights without much sleep, I admit I'm thinking about what the car ride will be like when we drop Amanda off at college. Marcia laughs, in the way she does when I say something silly.

It's Amanda's laugh, voice and music that are missing tonight. Of course, they aren't actually missing. They have just been transported twenty-five miles west of us, in the woods of Camp Conestoga. But two years from now, she won't be away at camp. She'll be away at college, somewhere. If memory

serves from my own crash-bang adolescence, the clunking of her younger brother around the house will be nearly cataclysmic by then.

In just one of the ways I've been blessed by my family, what is missing tonight is only missing in tangible form, for the memories have been etched in my mind as an eternal soundtrack. The first giggles at a goofy face. The toddler shriek of "Daddys Home!" as I walk in the door after work. The sweet, lilting voice she shares with Marcia. The riotous laughter at SpongeBob, our shared role model for optimism. And the music... The music is magic.

Her principal instrument, the flute, seems a natural extension of her voice. As it wafts down from her bedroom, the sound is more soothing and delightful than any sound I've experienced ("Cubs Win!" included). That both of our children have taken up music is a gift I'll carry with me through my last breath. I can't even comprehend how the markings on the page translate to sound, but Colin and Amanda wield an array of instruments that only seems to grow as the years pass.

In a couple years, she'll be off to college, likely to pursue a degree in music education. That moment on the on-ramp, that seemed so far away, won't seem so silly.

The only way to bear it, I think, is to live all your life all at once. Be immersed in the moment, be grounded in the times spent with friends and loved ones through the years, and be confident that more good times lie ahead. Do it all – experience it all, remember it all, hope for it all – all at once. I could be wrong, and often am. But as I try to sleep in the silence of the night, I can't think of any better way.

Goodnight, Sweetpea. All is calm. All is bright.