



## Molting

By Stacey Megally

*I don't want to be a violinist anymore.*

I'm barely whispering, but the words scrape my heart.

Flat on my back on the floor of my tiny apartment, I don't even notice that the sun's gone down.

These words have been swimming around in my brain since the summer. But it's not until tonight—six months before I'll graduate with a Bachelor of Music in violin performance—that I'm brave enough to say them aloud. Tears well in the corners of my eyes, then trickle down my cheeks and into my ears.

For sixteen years, this has been my life. For eight years, it's been my entire identity: Stacey, the Violinist. My crown jewel.

When did it start feeling like an old winter coat? Scratchy, hot, buttoned too tight.

Maybe it was in February, when my teacher died. I thought I'd just been mourning. I was still going to class, still practicing and going to rehearsals. But I woke up every morning wanting to go back to sleep. I watched everyone around me start to heal and move on by throwing themselves right back into the music. A new piece to work on, a new recording to discover. But those very same things made me feel even worse.

Maybe it was a few years ago when I first started feeling too big, too small, too something for my skin. My friends would rhapsodize late into the night about Shostakovich No. 7 or the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and I'd get so bored, I'd daydream about taking a nap on a sunny beach.

Maybe it was as far back as high school, when despite my grand dreams of becoming a violin superstar, I'd routinely choose reading or writing or even vacuuming my room over practicing.

Or maybe it was today during a late afternoon rehearsal. The conductor—a man who wore his ass-holery like a badge—stopped the entire rehearsal and stared at me with disgust emanating from his pores. I flushed from my scalp to my chest to my armpits. Beads of sweat popped up along my hairline. “Why the hell are you even here?” As the words flew out of his mouth, prickles burned up and down my arms.

Two hours later, I repeat his question into the darkness. *Why the hell am I even here?*

I'm here because I've practiced so hard my fingertips have morphed into thick, bulbous callouses. I have a rough, red mark right where violin meets neck—not unlike a quarter-sized hickey—that all violinists gripe about endlessly but are secretly proud of.

I'm here because I finally feel like the hard-core classical musician my friends and I idolized when we were in high school. I can stand up in front of my peers while my playing is sized up, dissected and ripped to shreds. And I'm not afraid to elbow my way to the front of the line so I can find overhead space for my violin on an airplane.

I'm here because I own enough tops, skirts, slacks, and shoes for at least seven combinations of all-black concert attire.

I'm here because if I wasn't, what would my friends at home say? After all my talk about dreaming big and becoming even bigger? That I'm selling out? Not good enough? Because if I'm not here, what have my parents been investing in for eight years?

But there's one thing I can't say, lying here alone where nobody is watching. I can't say I'm here because I love the music more than anything else.

The sky is completely darkened now, the shadows settled in for the night.

I always thought my first love was violin. But really, I've been in love with the way I walk around town with my violin case casually slung around my shoulder, my callouses throbbing and my neck sore. I'm in love with the pride I feel when I catch people staring.

I say the words again.

*I don't want to be a violinist anymore.*

This time, when the thoughts come hurtling, I put them aside. There's time for that later. For now, I lie quietly and let my heart break.