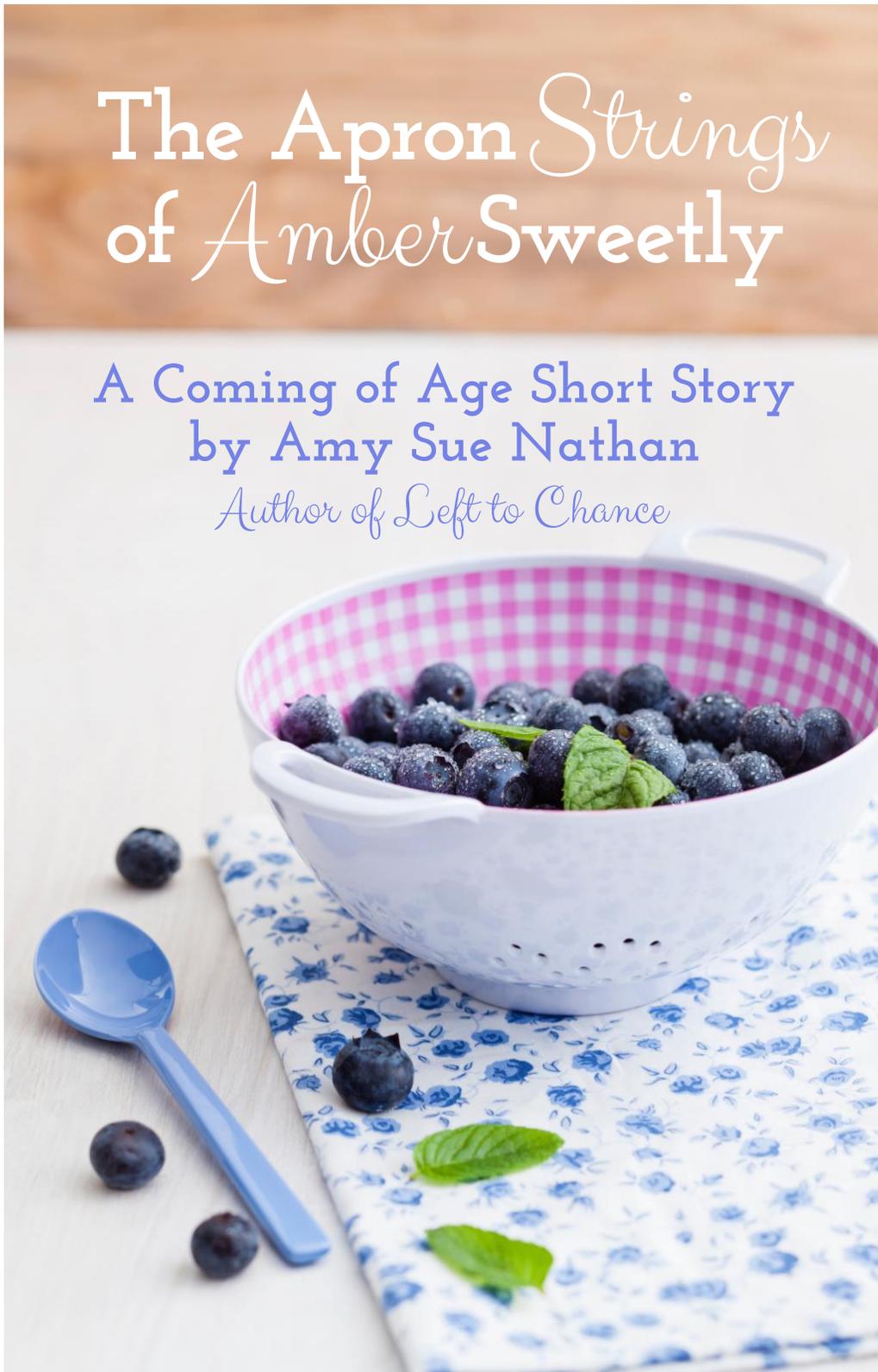


The Apron Strings of Amber Sweetly

A Coming of Age Short Story
by Amy Sue Nathan

Author of Left to Chance



A few things should stay the same. One of them is egg salad. So, standing at the kitchen counter wearing Gran's apron, the way Mom did when she feigned domestic, I chop two hard-boiled eggs in our blue speckled bowl. I add the right-sized glob of Miracle Whip by memory, although I'm not sure whose. I mince celery as small as sea salt crystals – the kind you pinch instead of shake – and mix it all together with the back of a spoon like Gran. Because white bread is best from the middle of the bag, I walk my fingers under the plastic and over the crusts and remove two slices, but assemble the sandwich only after cutting off those crusts. Then, I place diagonally cut fourths onto a yard sale china plate. Eighteen is old enough not to cut my sandwich and eat it – crust and all -- standing over the kitchen sink like Mom did so there was no plate to wash and no reason to stay in the kitchen. I'm not going anywhere yet, so I pause before eating as if to pray, but I don't.

With my first bite, I think of Daddy eating his lunch at the store – the same lunch every day -- ham and orange American cheese from a plastic wrapper on a Kaiser roll, butter on the inside, with French's yellow mustard. The sweet, silky butter against the slick, salty ham and waxy cheese juxtaposed with the tangy mustard convinces me Daddy must refine his palate – something I learn about on PBS cooking shows because we don't have cable. The butter – although across town -- slides down my throat and gags me.

I hide my sandwich at the bottom of the trashcan. Wasting food is not high on Daddy's list, nor is it high on mine with children starving in Darfur and around the corner -- but unthinkable actions are often the most necessary.

I hang the pink gingham, white-eyelet-trimmed, half-apron in the corner closet, on the hook inside the door. The apron hook is a testament to Daddy's dream of home-style meals in a home-style kitchen by a home-style wife.

As it's Saturday afternoon, I, unlike Mom, wear Gran's threadbare, blue cobbler apron with red piping, and scrub the only bathroom, just in case we have company and someone needs to "use the facilities," as Daddy says. I flush twice and hear Mom's voice saying there's no need to clean where you shit. I flush again and watch blue water disappear and reappear like a magic trick. I stop myself from bowing and instead, flip a rubber-gloved bird to the invisible intruder.

Peeling off the gloves and tucking them into the apron pocket, I inhale through my nose and memorize the since-Mom-left smell. Lemon and bleach aren't potent enough to remove the imagery, but they do a good job on the stench. The bathroom will not be lemony or bleachy and the faucets and knobs will not shine enough to be fun-house mirrors when I leave for college.

Leaving home sticks to the imaginary butter in my throat.

Daddy says he'll be fine. He says he won't starve. Or live in squalor – although I think he says *as if I'm in a ghetto*. As if. He says he knows how to iron his work shirts. But, when I was in fifth grade he said, "I know long division" and we stayed up practicing way past my bedtime. I failed the test. Daddy calls that "F" a blessing-in-disguise because I never asked for help again. I earn A's in all my subjects since that day and graduate at the top of my class, which isn't so hard.

I figure I'll work after high school until the counselor, Ms. Taylor, shows me a thick book filled with photos of Carter College and the list of fifty-two academic majors. And minors. And certificates. And concentrations. And electives. She tells me I'm *a shoe-in* and I hold my breath so long she dumps her lunch from a brown paper sack, hands it to me and says, "Breathe." Then she says, "You're going places, Amber Sweetly."

When I ask about college Daddy says, "Sure," but I know he thinks it's college with toll-free number for learning to cut hair or take blood or fix cars, like advertised on TV. I show him the scholarship letter and housing forms along with pages of pictures of pep rallies and actual ivy covered buildings. "What are you when you're finished *there?*" he asks.

"Educated," I whisper.

He nods and I nod back. I remind him that Carter College is just in Kent County and that when you know where someone is, she is never *too* far away.

Daddy's opens his mouth but nothing comes out. His throat has dried up like Mom's last bunch of dusty flowers that hangs upside down from the kitchen curtain rod on twine unwilling to fray.

Before bed I ask Daddy if I can have a white-board from the store so the next evening he brings one home.

“Is this a college thing?” he asks, setting it on my bed.

“No, it’s a summer thing.”

He seems satisfied with that answer and kisses me on the head. “Dinner at six-thirty?”

“Closer to seven,” I say.

His eyes open as wide as a cartoon character and he pats his belly, which is flat the way women wish for. He looks like he could use an extra dessert. I have Mom’s shape – a little round but mostly average. She was short but when I choose to think of her, I make her tall.

“Must be a special meal if I’m waiting til seven,” Daddy says.

I know he wants dinner at six-thirty but once again he has to get used to not having what he’s used to. “If you want, Daddy, you can finish the cooking and set the table, that way we could eat sooner. I have to finish this project.” I pat the white board and the case holding all my pens and markers. I raise and lower my eyebrows too.

He scratches his head, turns toward the door and then back to me. “I’ll wait,” he says. “Do what you need to do.”

“I am,” I say.

Daddy leaves my bedroom. I lean the white board on the window sill and grab a blue marker. I write everything I do around the house. Then in red I write things I know by heart. The third step creaks. If the toilet runs jiggle the handle and count to twenty. The long matches to relight the furnace pilot are at the top of the coat closet in a shoe box with extension cords. If you put a rag on a ruler and your hand under the raised window, you can Windex the outside right through the iron bars.

Seeing out through clean windows makes the inside not so small.

Daddy doesn't know things because he just works. Just working and just being is why Mom left, daddy says. People say they see her downtown. Those people think they're being nice.

Unlike Mom, Daddy is content. His ways are solid and unshakeable like that third little pig's brick house. I'm moving us to the house of straw and not telling him. I need to see him build the house of sticks. And I need him to do it in the next two weeks.

The list is too long so I continue on paper, making a note to ask Daddy for a second white board. He's sure to say that white boards don't grow on trees, but bring one home anyway.

Dinner's ready in five minutes but it's only six-forty. The soup is hot even though it's summer because those intentionally cold soups are like melted ice cream to Daddy – just not right. Tonight's soup is a see-through soup. Mom would call it a sorry-excuse. I add leftover chicken pieces and a can of mixed vegetables to the soup and make crescent rolls.

After soup and rolls – four for Daddy and two for me – I pile the dishes and place them in the sink. When I turn around Daddy is putting Gran's red floral, frilly bib apron over his head. I giggle as I reach for the fruit-print pinafore on the apron hook but Daddy pushes the closet door.

“Work on your project,” he says.

I am, but I say, “Oh, okay.” I turn him from his shoulders and tie the apron in a symmetrical bow pretty enough for a princess and hope Daddy doesn't look in the mirror.

He loads the dishes into the drying rack. The not-like-Mom-me wants to rinse them one more time and the not-Mom-me wants the plates facing the same direction and the bowls upside down.

Instead of more wanting, I run upstairs into my room and close the door.

I fall backwards onto my bed and stare up into the pink sheer Gran-made canopy. The dishes swirl in my head and I stack them neatly, placing them off to the side of my thoughts. My books are on the floor, in stacks like the dishes.

Daddy doesn't read much besides the newspaper. I add "Buy Daddy a book" to the white board list and then erase it with my thumb. He might be cleaning up tonight's mess but I still don't believe in miracles.

The next night I don't make dinner at all. I leave out the phone number for China Palace and a note reminding Daddy about leftover pork chops. He won't starve but to make sure I stack canned spaghetti rings on top of the fridge like a pyramid. He can use the can opener and just eat them with a spoon or his fingers. Daddy says he knows how to use a can opener.

I get on the bus, sit right behind the driver and I read until we get to the end of the line, then I change busses and ride back. Outside, summer sounds of sirens and music and yelling distract me, but the hissing of the bus brakes, the slam of the door and passengers' footsteps soothe me and I almost miss my stop.

Unlocking the front door, the house is extra dark. Daddy forgets the nightlights sometimes. Without looking or seeing, I tug on the floor lamp's chain to my right. The living room is tidy; Gran's doilies over the arms of the Daddy's easy chair are straight, not cockeyed like he when he falls asleep there and then stumbles up to bed mumbling he isn't tired. The kitchen is clean too. Canned spaghetti rings are in place. The coupons lay on the table.

In the trash can I see a KFC bucket, extra crispy.

I wake up because I smell something; something sweet -- maybe burned. I walk downstairs, sliding my hand along the metal banister and there's a light, eye-searing fog drifting out of the kitchen. I hear Daddy humming like it's Christmas morning. As I turn the corner I see what I smell -- a stack of polka dot pancakes, probably blueberry because they're in season. I know this from a sign at the supermarket.

We have blueberries?

He turns to me and smiles wide like a six-year-old who lost his first tooth.
“Figure I can make breakfast once-in-a-while.”

Or always. “Won’t you be late for work?”

“I’m the manager,” he says, flipping the cakes without looking at the pan.

I sit at the table, already set. I pour coffee for Daddy, add sugar and cream. I pour orange juice for me. Daddy has juice glass, empty except for the pulp and backwash sticking to the sides. My insides flutter and I tap my feet. I straighten the already-straight silverware and align the edges of the napkins that do not need aligning.

Daddy and pancakes for twelve arrive at the table. I help myself to three and Daddy takes six. He could build a fort with the rest of the pancakes, stay inside and eat his way out and not starve until I come home for Thanksgiving.

Then I plan a trip home for Columbus Day. Maybe Labor Day.

He takes another three.

“You dripped syrup on your shirt,” I say.

Daddy looks down, scoops a maple teardrop and puts his index finger in his mouth then dries his finger on his shirt. He smiles and keeps eating pancakes.

In his stained shirt Daddy clears the table and waves me away when I try to help. I lean back on the chair. We don’t mention college or leaving because we swallow that with the pancakes. With my tongue I push wet blueberry breakfast bits from between my cheeks and gums and check my T-shirt to see if there are any drying drips of syrup.

There are two.

Daddy brings home used cardboard boxes from the store so I can pack. He pushes the couch to the wall so I have more space and decides he likes it better there. The coffee table is in the way so he carries it to the alley. He doesn’t bring it back. When Daddy decides I need more light in the living room to see what-in-the-

good-name-of-Jesus I'm packing, he raises the shades to the ceiling and removes the curtain rods, curtains and all, because after all, they are just dust collectors.

As I label the packed boxes and seal them with tape, I hear doors and drawers creaking and slamming in the kitchen. Daddy emerges and takes my arm, ties a string around it. An apron string. I rise from the floor and see one of my boxes filled with aprons, even the one he cut.

"I don't need the aprons, Daddy," I say.

"I'm giving them to the Goodwill," he says.

My stomach tightens and I wrap my arms around myself.

"You're getting rid of Gran's aprons?"

He nods once. "You're the one who wears them and you're not coming back."

No one does.

Breakfast, lunch and something orange-tasting – a Starburst maybe -- stops at the base of my throat and then goes back where it belongs.

On leaving day I set down the last box and stare out the screen door at Daddy. He's rearranging the load in the back of the empty, borrowed minivan. He is okay, but also not, just like me. He glances at me, shrugs and holds his shoulders at his ears for an extra second. I lift up one finger as if to say, "I forgot something, one minute please." I smooth out the Carter College T-shirt from crew neck to hem. I'm wearing it for Freshman Day and look good in the school colors, gold and black. It feels more like Funeral Day and I decide the college color should be plain black.

Daddy opens the door and holds it with his body, making space for the box and me. I do not move.

"It's time," he says, fake smiling.

I know it's time but I'm stuck to the floor as if I've stepped with both feet onto a wad of bubble gum. I sit on the box. It's just the right size and shape for an extra

bench to pull out of the closet for company. *Did I lock my bedroom window? Unplug the iron? Pack enough underwear? Remember the photos?* I twirl the apron string around my wrist until it burns my skin and calms my nerves. Though queasy, my all-time favorite family dinner pops into my head and hugs my heart. Gran's spaghetti and meatballs with not-from-a-jar sauce. Daddy's garlic bread. Mom's ginger snaps we eat right out of the box. The smells fill my nose. The tastes coat my mouth. The memories tether me.

And then, they let go.

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