

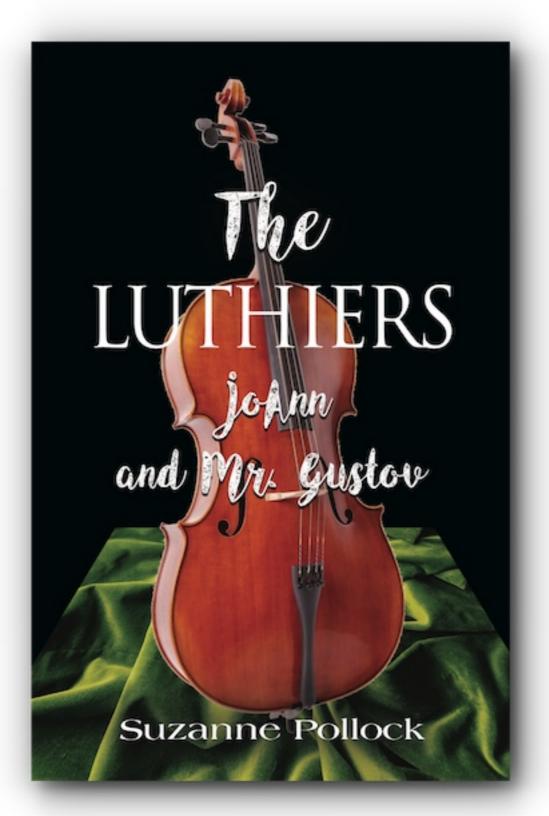
Today, I stopped by a little shop to get my guitar fixed. The owner, Mr. Gustov, calls himself a luthier and is very precise about everything, including sweeping the already-spotless floor. He offers me a job to help pay for the repairs, but I don't see modern machines or tools in use in his workshop. What have I gotten myself into?

THE LUTHIERS JoAnn and Mr. Gustov

by Suzanne Pollock

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First Edition

My Choice

E ach afternoon after school, I stop by the violin shop for a couple hours. The showroom is always alive with prospective buyers. For me, this unusual shop is like stepping back in time. The well-worn quiet floors are a deep-stained wood, and every displayed instrument is highlighted to stand out amongst the various woods that are used. Enhancing this special place, the mild fragrance of wood fills the air, much like a walk in the forest.

Mr. G. motions for me. "Come on into the workshop. I'm ready to put the last stains on these new instruments. I think you may be ready, JoAnn, to finish the guitars. I'd like you to watch me a few minutes."

He spreads a thin coat on a bass guitar, and it seems to dry almost immediately. He urges me to sand it with the finest sandpaper, then make sure it's dust free. After that, he puts another coat.

"Since we must rebuild the whole neck of your guitar, we will have to blend the finish. I took the liberty of stripping the top two coats of finish off the guitar body. Will has the

neck nearly complete, so let's put the finish on. We want to blend the new and old finish. Right, JoAnn?" he coaches.

I apply three coats on the neck while Mr. G. observes.

"Keep touching whatever you're working on," he says. "Rub the finish in with your fingertips. We need to blend this well, or else we'll have to refinish the whole guitar. The stains might get your nails dirty, but we can clean most of that off. You must feel the wood, so it will tell you how many coats it needs. Every piece is unique."

He lets me work, then asks, "Do you think this is enough?"

"Yes, sir."

He agrees. "Now, for my little trick." He takes a soft cloth and begins to buff the surface. He then lays it down and rubs the whole surface of the guitar with his large, gentle hands. Over and over, he covers every inch, massaging the stain into the wood.

"Why are you rubbing it with your hands?" I inquire. "Won't the cloth get a better shine?"

He lays my hand on the guitar.

"It's warm."

He nods. "The warmth from my hands and the oil from my fingers help the finish soak into the wood. And, often, I do this after every coat of stain."

"Do we want to get a high shine?"

"Not necessarily. I think the surface should look like a calm body of water, to allow the beautiful grain of the wood to show through."

Mr. G. lowers his glasses to the end of his nose, rubs his hand over the top of the instrument, and then examines the bottom. With his help, I feel confident that I've hit the mark of perfection on this guitar.

"That's it, JoAnn. Good work. In fact, this is the quality of work the Gustov Violin Shop expects."

All I can do is smile as I hang the bass guitar to dry.

"Maybe, just maybe sir, someday, a new guitar I've built will be featured on the center pedestal of the window for everyone passing by to see."

"Hmmm," he says, shifting his glasses from his nose to the top of his head.

Walking home, I have a very good feeling about helping in the shop.

Monday morning, Dad calls, "Time to go, JoAnn. I'll meet you in the truck."

I slip on my jacket as John passes me in the hall. "I hope you're not making a mistake. You're not going to like working for the old man. You'll be sorry."

My body stiffens. "This is my choice."

John keeps shaking his head as he leaves.

Mom gives me a quick hug. "I'm proud of you. I'm surprised, but think you'll really like it. It's quite an opportunity."

The aroma of brewing coffee follows me down the back steps. Dad shifts his old beat-up truck into gear as I close the door. In the school's horseshoe drive, the faculty and staff are arriving even though it's only a little past seven in the morning. The band is practicing for the upcoming football game, the janitor is mowing the field, and following behind him, the coaching assistants mark the yard markers with lime.

We're meeting with the principal, Mr. Powell, to finalize the co-op arrangement for me to spend part of my class time learning with Mr. Gustov at his shop.

The walls of Principal Powell's office are lined with class graduation pictures. He motions for us to sit and hands

me the proposed schedule, showing three days each week at my high school with two days of the week at the Gustov Violin Shop. I'm so excited.

"Do you like being at the shop?" he asks. "Your brother, John, sure didn't."

I nod vigorously. "I know I can do this."

Dad shifts in his chair, Mr. Powell straightens his bow tie, and they smile.

"This co-op idea is designed for a student like you," Principal Powell continues. "You can shine academically but also have the opportunity to learn from a master craftsman. The faculty believe you will get the best of an education, using your head and your hands. You start at the end of this week."

Dad and I walk out the front door, and I can't help but ask, "Did John spend more time with Mr. G. than just at camp?"

"Yes, he finished some tables for Mr. G. after that camp, but they didn't see eye to eye. Gustov uses Stradivarius construction methods, and John expected to learn modern techniques. I have to be at work in a few minutes. See you tonight, honey."

I look up to see Aaron coming toward me. "Is your guitar fixed?"

"It'll be ready in a couple of weeks."

He smiles. "If you can make it, band practice is Monday as usual. We could study together with the rest of the band afterward. Think you can stay for that?"

> "Sounds like a plan. I can bake brownies for everyone." Aaron looks surprised. "Whhaa...?"

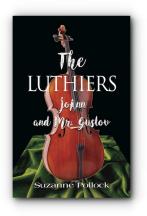
I giggle. "That's after Mom teaches me how to bake."

Aaron shakes his head, laughing. "What are you doing here so early, anyway?"

"Dad had to sign off on me doing a co-op with Mr. Gustov."

"That's awesome! Congratulations."

"Thanks. Well, see you at practice." With a wave, we each head to our classes for the day.



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