



*String
Theory*

a short story

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Browning*

AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING MER CAVALLO MYSTERIES

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String Theory is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, persons, or deities, living or dead is entirely coincidental. Honest.

The truest expression of a people is in its dances and its music.... Bodies never lie.

— AGNES DE MILLE (1905-1993) AMERICAN DANCER AND
CHOREOGRAPHER

STRING THEORY



I've done bad things in my life. Not serial killer bad, but my entry into heaven is by no means guaranteed. My father died last night. Murdered. I hadn't spoken to the man for twelve years. But thirteen years ago, I did threaten to kill him.

For the record, I had nothing to do with it.

This morning, a trio of officers arrived on my doorstep. One lamented my loss; one asked if I would mind speaking to a detective at the station; and the last one remained silent, his thoughtful gaze darting across the detritus of my apartment, dallying on the knives in my butcher block, perusing the titles in my bookshelf, lingering on my harp as if bemused.

The second officer cleared his throat and offered me a ride.

I glanced at the clock, lamented the time. "I was just on my way to my mother's."

He held open the door. "It's important."

Now, the hum of the air conditioner annoys me as I strain to hear beyond it. I've been in the interview room for nearly an hour. Initially, I paced the confines. Four steps of grimy linoleum separate

the door from the dingy rear wall. Six steps mark the width. A plain table divides the room with two chairs in opposition.

The door is unlocked. I know because I tested it, nearly hitting an officer escorting a prisoner as he marched down the crowded hallway. I had considered leaving, but my mother would think this is more important than my visit to her. She respects the law.

Peering through the square window, I deconstruct the cacophony just beyond the door, matching sound to action. When I tire of the spectacle, I resume pacing.

Each step, I think of my father. I'd always disappointed the man. Turns out we had an uncanny knack for falling for the same girl, and they were nothing like mom. But I was— small breasted, dark haired, cerebral. Mom had one other thing I lacked. Money. Years ago, that had been enough for my father, then I came along, a girl-child who reminded him of all the things he'd given up.

Mom stuck it out. She ignored the subtle signs of my father's philandering and dove deeper into her own passions. She earned a law degree, but never practiced.

Her money and my talent opened doors, and I marked time at Juilliard. I play the harp. Good enough that I now sit first chair five nights a week on Broadway, cloaked in black and providing nuance in quiet measure.

I'm facing the rear wall when I hear the snick of the door handle. I turn. A female detective stands momentarily silhouetted in the doorway. She is a study of blues—tailored suit, silky blouse, inquisitive eyes, all accessorized by the officer in navy standing at her shoulder.

"Molly Capriccioso?" She thrusts her hand forward. "I'm Detective Ward."

I shake her hand. Her grip is confident without trying to prove dominance like so many men's handshakes. The weight of her scrutiny immobilizes me as she takes my measure. She dismisses her partner and I feel like I just aced an unexpected test.

"Thank you for coming to the station," she says.

Her voice is an arresting combination of sultry efficiency. I flush,

look down. She turns slightly, enough to display athletic calves, sculpted ankles. The heel of her right pump is scuffed, as if she frequently drives in stop-and-go traffic.

The detective indicates a chair and waits for me to settle into it before she sits. She places a file in front of her, but doesn't open it. Her blouse gapes where it stretches across her breasts, revealing a flash of midnight satin against pale skin. Father would approve.

"Losing a parent is difficult. I'm sorry for your loss," Detective Ward says.

It is a meaningless nicety. A social convention. Expected, yet I have no response. She waits for me to speak. Polite. Finally, I nod.

She places her pen atop the file. "Tell me about your father."

I don't know how to begin. So I don't.

Her eyebrows draw together in a mélange of concern and encouragement. "This must be difficult for you. I appreciate you speaking with me. You are not under arrest, I'm just trying to understand what happened. You may have insight that you don't realize."

I take a deep breath, inhale a hint of her perfume, taste it before I speak. "He polarized people." The scent reduces me to cliché. "You either loved him or hated him."

"And you?"

"I've done both. But those are passionate emotions. It took a long time, but I finally reached a much more manageable apathy."

"Your aunt said you threatened to kill him."

Aunt Lila. My father's sister. She thinks I'm an aberration. "That was during my hate phase."

"Why did you try to kill him?"

Her perfume sours in my mouth. "I *threatened* to kill him. I didn't *try* to kill him. There's quite a distinction."

"Do you often make idle threats, Ms. Capriccioso?"

"I came home early from recital and found my father in bed with my girlfriend. Admittedly, it wasn't my best moment."

"What happened next?"

"I'm fairly certain it's detailed in the police report."

She flips through her papers until she locates the proper page. She scans the report. “I’m curious.” She sets the file down and cocks her head to the side. “How did an itty-bitty thing like you chase a six foot two naked man into the street?”

“I was motivated.”

The corners of her mouth quiver, then it’s all business again. “Were you able to patch things up with your girlfriend?”

“Allegra decided she liked men more than women.”

Her pen beats a rapid staccato against the metal table. “That must have made you angry.”

I think back to that date, pick the scab from the wound that never really healed. Allegra was like her name, quick and lively. She’d been my first love after a string of disastrous experiments. Loving her was like living an opera, full of drama and louder than it needed to be.

I point to the folder file. “Angry enough to need a police intervention.”

For a moment, only the air conditioner fills the silence.

“Did your mother know about the affair?”

It seems almost a sacrilege to talk about my mother here, a betrayal of sorts that I don’t want to share. I sift through my words. Chose them carefully. “Mom tried to shelter me, but I suspect she knew about them all.”

A man walks by the door, one of the many people in this busy place. Like a person in the subway, he’s one note in a symphony of anonymity.

“Do you own a gun, Ms. Capriccioso?”

Her question derails my reverie. “Do you ever ask a question you don’t already know the answer to?”

She smiles. It seems genuine, wide and toothy. “Not very often.”

“I’m sure the registration paperwork is in your little dossier. I’ve never been convicted of a crime. It’s my right. Fourth Amendment, or something.”

“The Fourth protects you against unreasonable search and

seizure.” She lifts her pen, removes a legal pad from the file, touches the tip to the top page. “Do you need that protection?”

“Philosophically?”

“Where were you last night?”

There is a rhythm to her questions, a variation on her themes that suggest a song. My guilt is her refrain.

“I was with my mother.”

“Your mother is very ill.”

“Yes.”

“You were close.”

I taste my anger. “We *are* close. She isn’t gone yet.”

“She’s in hospice.”

My throat tightens. “Is there a question there?”

“No, a statement of fact. I’m sorry, I went through something similar. I know how hard it is to lose someone close.”

I search for sarcasm in her eyes, but she stares back, unflinching. I nod.

“Your parents stayed married?” Detective Ward asks.

“It’s complicated. My mother is Catholic.”

“Your father lived alone.”

I shrug. “Some couples have separate beds. My parents chose different apartments. They’ve lived apart for years.”

“Do you blame your father for your mother’s illness?” Her eyes still watch me.

I take my time answering. “How long have you been a detective?”

“This isn’t about me.”

“How long?” I prod.

She leans back, crosses her arms, answers, “Seven years.”

I lean forward and claim the space she just vacated. “That’s how long my mother has been ill.” I drill her with my eyes. “Seven years, Detective. Plenty of time to assign blame. My father for infecting her, my mother for loving him, the doctors for not curing her. Hell, I even blamed God for letting it happen. Most of all, I blame myself.”

“Why?”

I shrug. "I'm HIV positive. Who knows? Maybe I was my father's patient zero."

Her brows arch, forming tracery above the windows of her eyes.

"Why don't you just come out and ask me if I killed my father?"

"Did you?"

"No, detective."

She rips her notes from the pad and pushes it towards me. Very deliberately, she positions her pen atop the blank sheet. "You'll feel better."

She's wrong.

I push back from the table. The chair scrapes loudly against the linoleum floor. "Am I free to go or are you going to arrest me?"

Detective Ward remains seated. "You haven't asked how your father died."

"You questioned me about a gun, Detective. Isn't that what you guys call a clue?"

Her shoulders rise and fall in a you-got-me-there motion. "You don't seem very broken up about it."

"My father's been dead to me for years. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to be with my mother."

I step toward the door.

Detective Ward stands and blocks my path, her hand on the knob. "He was strangled. More precisely, he was garroted. You have a harp, do you not?"

My sharp intake of breath answers for me.

"Just one?" she asks.

"Check your goddamn file. I've got two. If you need verification, ask the officers you sent to my apartment to round me up."

"Talk to me about the strings."

"It's a stringed instrument, Detective. It's got several."

A flicker of impatience flits across her face, but disappears so quickly I don't know if I imagined it. "What can you tell me about their composition?"

"I use Concedo strings. Does that mean anything to you?" I demand.

She shakes her head.

“They’re gut. But they’ve got extra layers of varnish on them which increases their opacity.”

“So, they lack transparency?”

“I own a Lyon & Healy concert grand pedal harp. I play in an orchestra. In a pit, Detective. It’s dark. White strings are easier to see.”

Her index finger taps against the handle as she thinks. “And the other harp?”

“It’s a Thormahlen. A folk harp, strung with lever-gut. The lower octave strings are steel core wrapped with silver-plated copper.”

“What about nylon?”

I feel my lip curl. “Nylon.”

“I have detectives executing a search warrant at your apartment, right now.”

I nearly laugh. “If that’s your murder weapon, you need to look for a new suspect.”

“And why is that?”

“I earned my Masters of Music from Juilliard. To get in, I had to perform seven different compositions —none of which you’d even be able to pronounce. I’ve performed in every major concert hall across the world. Nylon is for amateurs. It’s cheap. It would be like asking Louis Armstrong to play the kazoo. Sure, it’s still music, but you don’t see many professionals with kazoos.”

I place my hand over hers and push down on the slash of metal to open the door. “Sorry to disappoint.”

In the hallway, I stop, turn back to Detective Ward. “Maybe you should speak to Allegra. She plays guitar.”

“So?”

“So? Allegra’s the beneficiary to my father’s estate.”

“They’re still together after all these years?”

“Did you forget to put that in your folder?”

Two pink spots grow on her cheeks. “How does an estranged daughter know so much about her father’s relationships?”

“My mother’s my attorney. Neither one of us wants a damn thing from that man. She drew up the papers years ago.”

The heat blasts my face as I enter my mother’s apartment. It amplifies the scent of inevitability that settles into my pores. I drop my bag by the hospital bed set up in the living room. The nurse steps from the room.

I hold my mother’s hand. It is as light as a bird and I feel as if I am the tether that grounds her to this earth. My shoulders sag. I am nearly ready to let go.

Her hand twitches and her lips move. “Play for me.”

My mother’s face is wan, but she smiles when I pick up her lap harp. It only takes a moment to thread a new string through the soundboard and wind it around the pin.

“Did you tell the Detective about the insurance policy?” Her words are breathy.

I pluck the string. Slightly flat. I make a minute adjustment. It reverberates with renewed life.

“Yes.”

She nods and closes her eyes. “Your father never did pay attention to the important stuff.”

My fingers find the notes. The sound is not true, but nylon never is. My mother quiets.

My father died last night. The record reflects I had nothing to do with it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M.E. BROWNING served twenty-two years in law enforcement and retired as a captain before turning to a life of crime fiction. Writing as Micki Browning, she penned the Agatha-nominated and award-winning Mer Cavallo mysteries, and her short stories and nonfiction have appeared in anthologies, mystery and diving magazines, and textbooks. As M.E. Browning, she recently began a new series of Jo Wyatt mysteries with *Shadow Ridge* (October 2020).

Micki is a member of Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and Sisters in Crime—where she served as a former president of the Guppy Chapter. A professional divemaster, she resides in Florida with her partner in crime and a vast array of scuba equipment she uses for “research.”

To learn more about Micki, visit her website—and while you’re there, join her newsletter for the most up-to-date info about events, new releases, and behind-the-scenes-peeks!

<https://mebrowning.com>



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As M.E. Browning

Shadow Ridge, A Jo Wyatt Mystery

