Allegra Goodman

La Vita Nuova

From The New Yorker

The day her fiancé left, Amanda went walking in the Colonial cemetery off Garden Street. The gravestones were so worn that she could hardly read them. They were melting away into the weedy grass. You are a very dark person, her fiancé had said.

She walked home and sat in her half-empty closet. Her vintage 1950s wedding dress hung in clear asphyxiating plastic printed "NOT A TOY."

She took the dress to work. She hooked the hanger onto a grab bar on the T and the dress rustled and swayed. When she got out at Harvard Square, the guy who played guitar near the turnstiles called, "Congratulations."

Work was at the Garden School, where Amanda taught art, including theater, puppets, storytelling, drumming, dance, and now fabric painting. She spread the white satin gown on the art-room floor. Two girls glued pink feathers all along the hem. Others brushed the skirt with green and purple. A boy named Nathaniel dipped his hand in red paint and left his little handprint on the bodice as though the dress were an Indian pony. At lunchtime, the principal asked Amanda to step into her office.

You are like living with a dark cloud, Amanda’s fiancé had told her when he left. You’re always sad.

I’m sad now, Amanda had said.

The principal told Amanda that for an educator, boundaries were an issue. "Your personal life," said the principal, "is not an appropriate art project for first grade. Your classroom," said the principal, "is not an appropriate forum for your relationships. Let’s pack up the wedding dress."
“It’s still wet,” Amanda said.

Her mother could not believe it. She had just sent out all the invitations. Her father swore he’d kill the son of a bitch. They both asked how this could have happened, but they remembered that they had had doubts all along. Her sister, Lissa, said she could not imagine what Amanda was going through. She must feel so terrible. Was Amanda going to have to write to everyone on the guest list? Like a card or something? She’d have to tell everybody, wouldn’t she?

I waited all this time because I didn’t want to hurt you, Amanda’s fiancé had said.

After school, she went for a drink with the old blond gym teacher, Patsy. They went to a bar called Cambridge Common and ordered gin and tonics. Patsy said, “Eventually you’re going to realize that this is a blessing in disguise.”

“We had too many differences,” said Amanda.

Patsy lifted her glass. “There you go.”

“For example, I loved him and he didn’t love me.”

“Don’t be surprised,” said Patsy, “if he immediately marries someone else. Guys like that immediately marry someone else.”

“Why?” Amanda asked.

Patsy sighed. “If I knew that, I’d be teaching at Harvard, not teaching the professors’ kids.”

Amanda tried writing a card or something. She wrote that she and her fiancé had decided not to marry. Then she wrote that her fiancé had decided not to marry her. She said that she was sorry for any inconvenience. She added that she would appreciate gifts anyway.

Her parents told her not to send the card. They said that they were coming up for a week. She said that they couldn’t come, because she was painting her apartment. She did not paint the apartment.

In the winter, Amanda cut her hair short like a boy’s.

“Oh, your hair,” said Patsy. “Your beautiful curls.”

In the spring, the principal told Amanda that, regretfully, she was not being renewed for the following year, because the art program at the Garden School was moving in a different direction.

In the summer, Amanda’s fiancé married someone else.
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When school ended, Amanda took a job babysitting Nathaniel, the boy with the red handprint. Nathaniel's mother asked for stimulating activities, projects, science. No TV. Nathaniel's father didn't ask for anything.

Their first day together, Amanda asked Nathaniel, "What do you want to do?"

"Nothing."

She said, "You read my mind."

They ate chocolate mice at Burdick's and then they stood in front of the Harvard Coop and listened to Peruvian musicians. They explored the cemetery, and Amanda told Nathaniel that the gravestones were dragons' teeth. They walked down to the river and she said, "If you trace the river all the way to the beginning, you'll find a magic cave." They took the T to Boston and stood in line for the swan boats in the Public Garden. She said, "At night, these boats turn into real swans."

Nathaniel said, "You have a great imagination."

His mother lived in a Victorian house on Buckingham Street. She worked at the Media Lab at MIT and she had deadlines. The house had a garden full of flowers, but Nathaniel didn't play there, because you couldn't really dig.

His father lived in an upside-down town house on Chauncy Street. The bedrooms were on the bottom floors, and the kitchen and living room on top. His father was writing a book and he came home late.

Amanda and Nathaniel had pizza delivered to Chauncy Street and watched Charlie Chaplin movies from Hollywood Express. Sometimes they spread a sheet over the couch and ate a big bowl of popcorn.

It's hard to be with you, her fiancé had said. I feel like I'm suffocating.

Open a window, Amanda had said.

When the movie was done, Amanda gathered the sheet and stepped onto the balcony, where she shook out the crumbs.

Amanda and Nathaniel had play-dates with his friends at Walden Pond. They went canoeing on the Charles, and Nathaniel dropped his paddle in the water. Amanda almost tipped the boat, trying to fish it out. They wrote a book about pirates. Nathaniel told the stories and Amanda typed them on the computer in his father's study.

"Aarrr, matey," she typed, "I'm stuck on a ship."
When his father stayed out past Nathaniel’s bedtime, Amanda tucked Nathaniel in, and then she read books in the study. The books were about American history. She read only a few pages of each, so she didn’t learn anything.

If you ever stopped to listen, her fiancé had said, then you would understand.


*La Vita Nuova* explained how to become a great poet. The secret was to fall in love with a perfect girl but never speak to her. You should weep instead. You should pretend that you love someone else. You should write sonnets in three parts. Your perfect girl should die.

Amanda’s mother said, “You have your whole life ahead of you.”

She fell asleep on the couch waiting for Nathaniel’s father to come home. When she woke up, she saw him kneeling in front of her. She said, “What’s wrong?”

He said, “Nothing’s wrong. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to wake you.”

But he did wake her. She went home and stayed awake all night. “Let’s go somewhere,” she told Nathaniel the next day.

“Where?”

“Far away.”

They took the T to Ashmont, at the end of the Red Line. They sat together in the rattling car and talked about doughnuts.

“I like cinnamon doughnuts, but they make me cough,” Nathaniel said.

She slept lightly. She dreamed she was walking with Nathaniel in a pine forest. She was telling him not to step on the dead hummingbirds. The birds were sapphire-throated, brilliant blue. She stole *La Vita Nuova*. It was just a paperback.

Her sister called to check in. Her friend Jamie said she knew someone she’d like Amanda to meet. Amanda said, “Soon.”

Jamie said, “What exactly are you waiting for?”

Nathaniel’s father pretended not to look at her. Amanda pretended not to notice his dark eyes.

“The question is what you’re going to do in September,” Amanda’s mother told her on the phone.
“The question is what you’re going to do with your life,” her father said.
Dante wrote, “O you who on the road of Love pass by / Attend and see / If any grief there be as heavy as mine.”
“Then was the last time you painted anything?” her mother asked. “Apart from your apartment?”
Her father said, “I paid for Yale.”

All day Amanda and Nathaniel studied the red ants of Buckingham Street. They experimented with cake crumbs and observed the ants change course to eat them. Nathaniel considered becoming an entomologist when he grew up.

The next day he decided to open his own ice cream store.
They hiked to Christina’s, in Inman Square. Nathaniel pedaled in front on his little bike. Amanda pedaled behind on her big bike and watched for cars.

At Christina’s, Nathaniel could read almost all the flavors on the board: adzuki bean, black raspberry, burnt sugar, chocolate banana, chocolate orange, cardamom. Nathaniel said, “I’ll have vanilla.” They sat in front near the bulletin board with ads for guitar lessons, tutoring, transcendental meditation.

“What’s an egg donor?” Nathaniel said.
I want to be with you for the rest of my life, her fiancé had told her once. You are my best friend, he had written on her birthday card. You make me smile, you make me laugh. “Love weeps,” Dante wrote.

“Could I have a quarter for a gumball?” Nathaniel asked Amanda.
“You just had ice cream,” she said.
“Please.”
“No! You just had ice cream. You don’t need candy.”
“Please, please, please,” he said.
“You’re lovely,” Nathaniel’s father whispered to Amanda late that night. She was just leaving, and he’d opened the door for her.
“You’re not supposed to say that,” Amanda whispered back.
“You’re supposed to write a sonnet.”
Nathaniel said that he knew what to do when you were upset.
She said, “Tell me, Nathaniel.”
He said, “Go to the zoo.”
Nathaniel studied the train schedule. They took the Orange
Line to Ruggles Station and then the No. 22 bus to the Franklin Park Zoo. They watched orangutans sitting on their haunches, shredding newspapers, one page at a time. They climbed up on viewing platforms to observe the giraffes. They ran down every path. They looked at snakes. They went to the little barnyard and a goat frightened Nathaniel. Amanda said the goat was just curious. She said, "Goats wouldn't eat you."

Nathaniel fell asleep on the T on the way home. He leaned against Amanda and closed his eyes. The woman sitting next to Amanda said, "He's beautiful."

Amanda's friend Jamie had a party in Somerville. The wine was terrible. The friend that Jamie wanted Amanda to meet was drunk. Amanda got drunk too, but it didn't help.

She was late to work the next day. She found Nathaniel waiting on his mother's porch. "I thought you were sick," he said.

"I was," she told him.

They walked to Harvard Square and watched the street magicians. They went to Le's and shared vegetarian summer rolls and Thai iced tea.

"This tastes like orange chalk," Nathaniel said.

They went to a store called Little Russia and looked at the lacquered dolls there. "See, they come apart," Amanda told Nathaniel. "You pop open this lady, and inside there's another, and another, and another."

"Do not touch, please," the saleslady told them.

They walked down to the river and sat on the grass under a tree and talked about their favorite dogs.

"Labradoodle," Amanda said.

Nathaniel giggled. "No, schnoodle."

"Golden streudel."

Nathaniel said, "Is that the kind you had when you were young?"

She dreamed that she was a Russian doll. Inside her was a smaller version of herself, and inside that an even smaller version.

She ordered a set of blank wooden dolls online and began painting them. She covered the dolls with white primer. Then she painted them with acrylics and her finest brushes.

First, a toddler only an inch high, in a gingham bathing suit. Second, a fingerling schoolgirl, wearing glasses.
Third, an art student, with a portfolio under her arm.
Fourth, a bride in white with long flowing hair.
Fifth, a babysitter in sandals and sundress. She painted Nathaniel standing in front of her in his gecko T-shirt and blue shorts. He stood waist high, with her painted hands on his shoulders.
When the paint was dry, she covered each doll with clear gloss. After that coat dried, she glossed each doll again until the reds were as bright as candy apples, the blues sparkled, and every color looked good enough to eat.
She bought another set of blanks and began all over. She stayed up late each night painting.
"Why are you so sleepy?" Nathaniel asked her in the afternoons.
In the mornings, his mother asked her, "Why are you always late?"
She fell asleep with Nathaniel at eight o’clock. She curled up next to him in his captain’s bed and woke when his father came in and touched her cheek.
"I was wondering if you could come to the Cape with us," Nathaniel’s father said as they tiptoed out into the hall.
She shook her head.
"Just for a few days in August."
His voice was low. His eyes were almost pleading. You are so beautiful, her fiancé had said.
She painted Nathaniel’s father on a set of Russian dolls.
First, she painted a toddler in a romper.
Second, she painted a boy in a little Catholic school uniform with short pants and a tie.
Third, she painted a bridegroom, dashing in a dark suit with white stephanotis for his boutonnière.
Fourth, she painted a new father, with a baby Nathaniel in his arms.
Fifth, she painted a gray-haired man in reading glasses. She painted Nathaniel’s father older than he was, and stouter. Not handsome, as he was in real life, but grandfatherly, with a belly following the contours of the bell-shaped doll.
As before, she coated each painted doll with clear gloss until the colors gleamed. As before, she made each doll a perfect jewel-like object, but she spent the most time on the biggest, oldest doll.
After that, she bought more blanks and painted more sets: peo-
people she knew, people she didn’t know. People she met. Portraits in
series, five dolls each. She painted Patsy, blonder and blonder in
each incarnation. She painted her fiancé as a boy, as an athlete, as
a law student, as a paunchy bald guy, as a decrepit old man. She
didn’t kill him, but she aged him.
She lined up the dolls and photographed them. She thought
about fellowships. She imagined group shows, solo shows. Refusing
interviews.
She took Nathaniel to swimming lessons. She went down to the
harbor with him and they threw popcorn to seagulls that caught
the kernels in midair.

Nathaniel had his seventh birthday party on Castle Island. He and
his friends built a walled city of sandcastles with a moat. Nathaniel
was the architect. Amanda was his assistant. His father was the pho-
tographer. His mother served the cake.

At the end of the party, Amanda gathered the presents. Natha-
aniel was leaving for the Cape with his father, and then his mother
was going to take him to the Vineyard for Labor Day weekend. Na-
thaniel said, “When we come back, it will be September.”
She said, “You’re right.”
He said, “Could you come with me?”
Amanda said, “I can’t. I’m painting my apartment.”
He said, “What color?”
She said, “Actually, I’m moving.”
“Moving away?”
She told him, “You can talk to me on the phone.”
Nathaniel started to cry.
His mother said, “Honey!”
He held on to Amanda and cried. “Why can’t you be my babysit-
ter anymore?”
“I’m going to New York,” she said.
“Why?”
Because your mother doesn’t like me, she told him silently. Be-
cause your father wants to sleep with me. Because the only reason I
came to Boston was my fiancé. Because the question is what I’m go-
ing to do with my life. But all she said aloud was, “That’s where I’m
from.”

She knelt down and gave him a map she’d drawn. She’d singed
the edges of the parchment to make it look old.
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The map showed the cave at the source of the Charles River, the swan boats flying away, the chocolate mice at Burdick's. Christina's Ice Cream, Ashmont, the cemetery with dragons' teeth.

Nathaniel's mother said, "This is gorgeous."
Nathaniel's father said, "You're really very talented."
Nathaniel said that he didn't want a map. He said that he would rip it up.

His mother said, "Nathaniel, is that any way to treat a gift?"
His father said, "Come here."

Nathaniel tore a big piece out of the map. He screamed at his parents, "I don't want you!"

"He's tired," Nathaniel's mother told Amanda. "He's exhausted. Too much excitement in one day."

"I'm not tired!" Nathaniel screamed, and he wouldn't let go of Amanda. He held on to her, half strangling her with his arms around her neck.

"Look, Nathaniel—" his father began.

His mother interrupted. "You're making it worse!"

Nathaniel was crying harder. He cried with his whole body. No one could get him to stop.

Amanda closed her eyes. She said she was sorry. She said, "Please stop." Finally, she rocked him in her arms and said, "I know. I know."
the roof of her building telling stories for hours. One of those stories was about Etgar’s father, and matching uniforms, and the Sinai Campaign. I really never (at least until now) write stories about things overheard, or based on the tales friends tell—it’s just not how I work. And I don’t think I’d have dared to write this one if not for the confusion caused when you mix American overpoliteness with Israeli straight talk. I wanted to tell Etgar something about the narrative structure of the story. But I didn’t want to be rude and talk about a personal account in an inconsiderate way. So I asked, in Hebrew, “Would you mind if I engaged with that story as a story?” And Etgar turned and said, “Sure. Take it.” As in, it’s yours, go write it. And there I was backpedaling and apologizing and saying, No, no, that wasn’t my intent. But Etgar made it clear. He writes about talking fish and fake angels and women that turn into hairy men after dark, and really, this is not the kind of thing he would do. So a year went by, and I was living in Berlin for a few months and thinking about history and the Holocaust and Israel, and that’s when I sat down to write “Free Fruit.”

Allegra Goodman is the author of five novels—The Cookbook Collector, The Other Side of the Island, Intuition, Paradise Park, and Kaaterskill Falls—and two collections of short stories, The Family Markowitz and Total Immersion. Her fiction has appeared in The New Yorker, Commentary, and Ploughshares. Her essays and reviews have appeared in the New York Times Book Review, New Republic, Boston Globe, Wall Street Journal, and American Scholar. Raised in Honolulu, Goodman studied English and philosophy at Harvard and received a PhD in English literature from Stanford. She is the recipient of a Whiting Writers’ Award, the Salon Award for Fiction, and a fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She lives with her family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she is writing a new novel.

- Whenever I finish a novel, I write a couple of short stories. It’s a chance to play and to experiment. In this case, I’d finished a long, richly layered novel, The Cookbook Collector, and I thought, Now for something completely different “La Vita Nuova” is shorter than most of my stories. The style is spare. Every word counts, and every detail has particular weight. I tried dozens of beginnings before I decided on Amanda and her wedding dress. Once I settled into her point of view, the wry narrative followed. While the story is quite structured, I wrote it without a plan, improvising all the way through the last line. In the weeks I worked on it, I dreamed about it all the time.

Ehud Havazelet has written three books, the story collections What Is It Then Between Us? and Like Never Before and the novel Bearing the Body. The latter two were named New York Times Notable Books. Other awards in-