

ENGL 2915A:
Creative Nonfiction Workshop Portfolio

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The Lunch Rush
(Nonfiction Short Story)

Elderly woman, on the cusp of ninety-five, long-since retired from a life of struggle. The wrinkles in her skin mark years of hard work as a thriving young feminist, fighting for her rights during times of unrest. The neat bun wrapped tightly atop her head hides her untamed locks, once a symbolic image of the wild and unpredictable sexual revolution. Her harsh facial features paired with a permanently furled brow come together to emanate an aura of independence and self-reliance; admirable attributes that once helped Rita strive intellectually in a purely patriarchal society. As an aspiring physician, she seized the honorable title of “sole female member of the *guinea pigs*,” the first graduating class of what was then Sir George Williams University and is known today as Concordia University. Furthermore, upon receiving her diploma, as she witnessed her fellow classmates march straight overseas, she conjured up the courage to march straight into the Dean’s office at the McGill School of Medicine and demand an interview. Though he snidely responded: “While you exceed all of our academic qualifications for admission into our graduates program, we fear that your ‘physical presence’ may be too distracting for your [male] classmates,” Rita did not take this refusal kindly. Instead, it rekindled the spark that burned from within her, fueling her fiery passion and determination.

Though barely tall enough to peer over the glass display case at the array of sandwiches that lay before her tired eyes, what Rita lacks in height, she makes up for in personality. For the first time in her long existence, an expression of utter defeat

overtakes her face as she ponders her lunchtime sandwich selection with the utmost of difficulty.

It is the lunch rush at Café Double and the line-up trails on endlessly into the distance. Rita is aware of the crowd of impatient customers waiting behind her: short-tempered lawyers reeling in potential clients with a free panini, energetic hairstylists running across the way to grab a quick grilled cheese in between appointments, mobs of CEGEP students first discovering the bliss that exists outside the confines of mystery meat and brown paper bags, hungry waves of construction workers in dire need of a “*Philly cheese steak avec des frites pour emporter*,” and cranky senior residents of the building like herself, who strongly believe that with each year of wisdom, they gain a greater right to unarguable rudeness.

Rita tries to tune out the bratty Dawson student standing behind her, loudly whistling the *Jeopardy* theme song in her ear. She points to a tray clearly comprised of tuna-fish sandwiches and readdresses the busy server as if he were *Alex Trebek* himself: “What is...in this one?...Or that one?...And that one over there in the pita?...What about over here on the baguette?...Did I already ask about the toppings on these ones?” Unable to lock in her final answer—a seemingly trivial decision—, Rita is suddenly struck with a rising wave of emotions: she becomes bothered, irritated, disturbed, troubled, distraught, upset, angry, fuming, furious, **LIVID!**

Why can she not simply make up her mind? Anxiety builds up inside of her to unbearable levels, like a hot air balloon, ready to pop at any given moment. Now on the verge of breaking down in tears, Rita questions once more how such a seemingly mundane decision, made 34, 689 times before, could place such crushing emotional

weight upon her brittle, bony shoulders? Especially when just this morning, upon receiving that terrifying telephone call—the unimaginable news in the form of a pathology report—she instantaneously agreed to an invasive hysterectomy and partial mastectomy without as much as a flinch. In that life-shattering moment, the decision to hand over the deeds to her femininity, a precious feat that she fights relentlessly to preserve on a daily basis, seemed so effortless; yet the truly demanding decision, yanking fiercely at her heartstrings: two sad slices of bread smeared with drab pastes and pungent deli meats.

Rita feels a void in the pit of her stomach, one that not even a club sandwich can fill. The risky reconstructive surgery that follows these radical procedures as well as the tedious months of physiological and emotionally-straining recovery does not even cross her mind, for she cannot seem to get past the irony that the same close-minded McGill medical ward that had rudely rejected a promising young woman's demand for admission so many years ago, was now opening its doors to her with such ease, accepting her admission so readily, nearly half a century later.

Should she not welcome the idea of embodying more masculine features with open arms? Can she not rest on the fact that her lifelong wishes to escape unfair judgment based solely on her appearance—or 'physical presence' as the Dean once put it—may come true after all? Is this not the end-goal that she always dreamt to attain? To be treated on the same grounds as the egocentric businessman, standing in front of her at the cash, as she waits anxiously for her time to checkout?

Tracing my tendons
(Memoir)

So much blood; so much glass; so much anger, resentment, and frustration flowing through my veins. These emotions are as raw to me as the flailing flap of flesh hanging from my forearm. The gaping wound hangs open like an invitation; it welcomes infectious intruders with open arms, as my vulnerability is exposed to the outside world. The broken glass scattered across my older brother's bedroom floor becomes a mere extension of my broken self. I stare blankly at the millions of little pieces that once fit together so perfectly—like a jigsaw puzzle—to support the glass-paneled door separating Steven's room from the den. The frame seems so bare now; so lonely.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection in what I believe to be a shard of glass, peaking out from behind the crimson mess. Only moments ago, it was the untouched arm of an innocent eight-year-old girl; whereas now, the gruesome site can best be described as a crime scene. *Why did it have to amount to this? Why did he have to tease his little sister so? Forcing her to gear all her anger towards the transparent door.*

The door shrieks in pain as I slide my hand through its deceiving exterior, its strong appearance no more than a front. Suddenly, the expression “punch a pillow” holds much more worth to me.

As I attempt to pry the foreign object from its newfound home, I feel its stubborn refusal. It is at that point that I realize the dreadful reality: that this shard of glass is not glass at all, but rather my tendon, charming me with its illusive beauty. Warm Blood trickles down my numb fingers in an attempt to thaw my frozen existence. They were the same long, delicate fingers that loved to caress the ebony and ivory keys of the dining room upright piano for hours on end. I had never spent more than a day away from my

only means of emotional expression, until now. My *Yamaha T-118 Polished Ebony* with its maple bridges and hardwood buttons was my sole means of emotional release. I treated each one of its eighty-eight keys with the utmost of care. No matter the circumstance, my music was always there for me. Whether it was in the form of a light jazz standard from my real book at times of elation or the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* to console me during periods of sadness, my loyal companion never left my side...Until that dreadful day, burnt into my memory like a branded cattle...

"I was lucky," the doctor says. "Extremely lucky," he chimes on, still in utter disbelief. He continues: "Luck is an understatement." *All right, enough already, I get it.* According to the preliminary examination, all motor function has remained in tact; Paralysis is out of the question. I barely missed my main artery; sparing my life by less than a centimeter. I will be "better in no time". However, fourteen stitches cannot mend my torn heartstrings. Though I am unaware at the time—ecstatic to return to my scales and arpeggios—the damage is irreparable. This little incident is a forecast of the gloomy weather approaching overhead. And I am less than interested in taking the appropriate preventative measures.

Who was Dr. Adler kidding? There is no such thing as LUCK. This was certainly no blessing in disguise. I realize now that G-d was trying to spare me the pain and suffering that was to come:

The struggles at the piano;
The years of constant frustration;
Isolation;
Intimidation;
Restriction;
Strife for perfection;

A dire need for self-correction;
And finally, the real kicker:
All of that unbelievable **TENSION**.

For three grueling years, I wither away in a college practice module; eating myself alive, as I practice and practice: scale after scale, chord progression after chord progression, transitioning lifelessly from one transcription to the next. I crank and crank and crank away, the tension in my arms rising to unbearable heights in tandem with my emotional tension. I lead a stubborn lifestyle. I begin to refer to myself as "The Starving Artist"; an alter ego that soothes my refusal to take even the shortest of five-minute breaks.

Though, nothing could stop me from the path of least resistance I was drawn to like a magnet. And so I continue to hammer away at those innocent keys, mercilessly. With such a refined ear, one would think it ironic that I cannot hear the clear signs. I have already dug myself a grave; now, all that remains is to finish the deed.

And slowly but surely, I would eventually get there at the inhuman pace I was going. Finally, one brisk autumn day, my overused arms find their voice and holler at the top of their bruised lungs: "enough is enough". They form a mutiny against my entire being: my wrists, my forearms, my shoulders, and my psyche. After years of leading an extremist lifestyle—an all-or-nothing mentality—the latter was about to outweigh the former.

The prognosis: **T-E-N-D-O-N-I-T-I-S**.

Once again, as they were on that gloomy second-grade vacation day, my tendons are just as vulnerable. However, this time, they are not visible to the naked eye. I should have listened when they called out to me from beneath my skin, begging me to slow it

down, take a breather, and perhaps go for a water break once in a while. But I stubbornly refused. And now look what happened?

I lost piano; music;
A huge part of my life;
The only important part of my life;
The only way to express myself;
To keep myself sane;
Afloat;
At least in a safe boat.

It was my life;
It was my death;
My demise;
My compromise;
And so without it, I feel so
L-O-S-T.

I am but a bobbling head; A cracked buoy: Slowly sinking beneath the ocean's surface as water seeps in. I am trapped, with no means of escape; no way to express my emotions in the creative outlet that once took up so much space in my absurd life; a luminous presence in the dimly lit room.

And so I ask myself: *"Where to Mr. Magoo?" How can I fill this creative void? This underlying need to keep my voice flowing and my fingers tapping? I am still desperate to be heard in this chaotic world by any artistic means necessary.* And that is when it suddenly hit me, my protagonist's epiphany: the answer is as black and white as the keys of my piano. All I had to do was trade in one type of keyboard for another;

Do-Re-Mi for
A-B-C
Eighty-eight keys for
Twenty-six.
Ebony and ivory for
Q-W-E-R-T-Y.

And everything would be all right once again; balance would be restored to my disrupted world. And it was.

Mi·ner·va
(*Descriptive Piece*)

Mi·ner·va:

Her elegant name derives from Ancient Roman Mythology. Equated with the Greek Goddess *Athena*, she was the virgin goddess of poetry, medicine, commerce, crafts, magic, and above all, wisdom; all were important traits that drew my Grandmother towards her when adopting a name for her most-prized possession: her double bass.

One could not peel their eyes away from her pure, unadulterated beauty, for her natural glow was absolutely breathtaking. The silky strands of her long horse's main wove tightly along the rich Brazilwood of her bow, forming a perfectly balanced ratio of salt-to-pepper proportions. As the lips of her bow gently graze the steel wire strings of her curvy, pear-shaped body, *Minerva* graces the room with sweet serenades. Her deep, low voice provides an indestructible foundation for the orchestra members to build their many layers upon. A long time ago, she was the driving force behind the impressive thirty-piece string section of the *L.A. Doctor's Symphony Orchestra*; it was a simpler time spent mesmerizing her listeners, capturing them in an inescapable, yet enchanting trance.

On the day of *Minerva's* departure, her owner bathes each string in one last coating of rosin, in order to enhance her contagiously attractive aura; a last-minute attempt to immediately spark the young girl's curiosity upon the instrument's unexpected arrival on that brisk autumn afternoon...

As the young girl stumbles home from a boring day of grade school—feeling unchallenged by useless basic facts and repetitive times-tables—she scurries past the six-

foot-tall cardboard box, tripping over the massive obstacle that sits unopened in the front hall. Her jaw drops in utter disbelief as she rereads the white label of her newfound treasure. *There must be a mistake. The unwrapped gift could not possibly be addressed me. Could it?* Never before in her ten-and-three-quarter years of existence has she ever received a package of such Grand stature. She suddenly feels incredibly important: *Is this what it feels like to be grown-up?*

Without a single ounce of hesitation, she tears open the stubborn duck-tape with all of her schoolyard might, unraveling the mystery of its concealed contents at an impressive pace. The young girl admires the gargantuan instrument that stands before her with such charm and poise. She instantly draws an emotional parallel between this powerful, feminine creature of nature and her powerful, cancer-battling warrior of a Grandmother. Both are Goddesses of immeasurable powers.

Minerva's ebony skin, as young and unaffected by age as her owner's, masks years of ware-and-tare, snapped strings and blistering fingers. Jenny could not overlook the shocking resemblance between *Minerva's* long neck and that of her *Mamma Minnie's*, a perfect statement of their shared elegance. The splintering wood of her scroll not only tells tales of a long life of late-night orchestra practices—to perfect the recurring theme of *Beethoven's Fifth Symphony*, 'fate constantly knocking at one's door'—and extended dress rehearsals—to capture the eeriness of *Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique*—, but each crease also tells the story of an independent, strong-willed, single mother, who fled a world of abuse and misery to protect the innocence of her other most prized possession: her only son, no more than an oblivious toddler at the time. He would later reciprocate with the gift of a loving granddaughter: a talented young girl, her biggest fan,

her piano protégée, her apprentice, her musical raison-d'être, the *Mozart* to her *Haydn*, a next of kin to receive her double bass with open arms, eager to unravel *Minerva's* deepest, darkest secrets: her tricks, her treats, the intricacies of each of her carefully crafted grooves.

Furthermore, she would not only carry on *Minerva's* profound legacy, but was equally prepared to create new memories in her balmy wood. Her grandmother knew to ignore the surges of doubt that began in her feet and shot up through her entire being. Though she could not predict how her granddaughter would handle this epic twenty-five pound Roman Goddess, she could be sure that *Minerva's* journey was far from over as the young girl's artistic passion was controlled by a power much greater than both of them combined: the power of 'music'.