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Spoiled in Academia

Karen V. Lee

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I awake from his snoring. Three a.m. No excuse but to think. My nightly ritual. His breath stops. A deep inhale. Nasal congestion like rhythmic waves. Ripples of wind. Loud and soft, high and low. A whispering phrase. Find ear-plugs. Squish into ears. Roll other way. There are fast gasps. Then he stops. Crescendo to double high C. A four-beat rest. Then a gag. Quickly, I sit up. His breath returns with a roar of dynamics. I lie back down. Yawn.

The unbearable lightness of change. Life after the doctoral dissertation will be different. A colleague said there are adjustments. Writer's block. Professorship is not automatic. Soon, a Ph.D. from the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia. My dissertation, *Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators*, has eight short stories and an autobiography. Nontraditional research about the identity conflicts of musicians who complete an education degree. Rehearsed the turmoil of change and context of pain. Inspired to write scholarly and creatively. Maybe that was the trouble. Spoiled in academia. Research, theories, philosophers, and psychologists. Intellectual rush. Read anything I wanted. The library an exotic dim sum. Strolling appetizers brought magic and myth. Shrimp dumplings, snake soup, egg tarts, with Piaget. An aroma of plots. Dissertation starts, "Today I will tell a story. It has a beginning, middle, but no end." Is this the end?

A desperate lady phoned. Demanded a piano teacher for her 6-year-old daughter. No time, I say. I needed to complete my doctoral dissertation, look for academic work. Offered good money for my A.R.C.T. in piano performance and pedagogy. Irrelevant. Years ago, I taught. Forty dollars an hour. Nights and weekends in my parent's basement. One-to-one instruction echoed. Me, myself, and I.

Lots of jobs pass by me. But I hunt for professorship. A tenure-track position. Owe my family and friends a university gig. Validate my education. I must not offend them by settling for less. But where to begin? In town or out, academic or non?

For 9 years, the luxurious life of a grad student. Taught undergrad courses Tuesday and Thursday mornings. By noon, I passed my supervisor's office. Short quips and queries, he never failed to bait me. A propelling game of polemics. I checked my mail, visited secretaries, and shared stories about students and children. Then I escaped to write. Many half-started journals.

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Scribbled notes of fascinating folks. I conjured stories to publish. How to give this up?

To be a professor or writer. Which life do I want? Or can I do both? No choice but to write during the day. Inspiration from isolation. It is tricky business to write. Solitary confinement. The world is a table, chair, and books. My hideaway. Desperation triggers writing rituals. Clean and wash clothes. I have sparkling bathrooms. And very clean clothes. No choice but to write during the day.

The doctoral committee meeting went well. Two hundred and eighty-one pages of flesh and blood. They supported it. My supervisor read a draft. Some typos, he said. Broader issues, he said. Give me revisions. Modus operandi of a doctoral committee. Seven years in a weighty paper. I get out of bed. Tiptoe to the kitchen. Pour a glass of water. I walk to the magnum opus. Stare. Should I drown it?

I must acknowledge I have crossed the finish line. The end of graduate school. Celebration with interrogation. But the end is about something deeper. A professional student for 9 years. What next?

I grab at the future. Ivory tower surrounded by abstracts. My friend Geraldine says if you want professorship, you'll get it. Convocate in 2004, took 2 more years. Damn car accident. Permanent neck and back injuries. Gone. Forget about my Tercel. For God's sake, he drove into me. Glass everywhere. I breathed in and out, the way I learned from band class. Could not see straight after the hospital X-ray. Massage treatments have helped. A bond has been sealed with my massage therapist. Words gush when I visit her. I tell her stories and she listens. How to enter the job market?

University folks do not know how to find employment. Academics know tenure theories but do they know practice? Permanent head damage. That is what I have. I must continue to research musicians becoming music educators. Maybe it will help me understand doctoral students becoming professors.

Revived by a gasping snore. There is a huge rest. A pause. Slowly, I curl up. Intonation is better. Needs more dynamics. I hear short staccatos. More syn-copation. But watch articulation. There is a slow legato with softness. Tighten my eyes. My nightly ritual. No excuse but to think. Three a.m. I awake from his snoring.

Karen V. Lee is a faculty advisor and cofounder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators cohort (TIME) at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Her research interests include issues of musician identity, teacher identity, music education, teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. She is a musician, music educator, writer, and researcher. She completed her doctoral dissertation, Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators, as a book of short stories about musicians becoming music educators in a classroom context.