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George: Music and Apple Pie

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Statement of Purpose

The following story is written in response to professional musicians becoming classroom music educators. It chronicles the journey of a professional trumpet player during his university teacher education degree. He is guided by his personal and artistic experiences when shifting from performer to teacher identity. I touch on the themes of family, finances, teaching, learning, fatherhood, performing, and musicianship as musicians are confronted when changing careers for financial stability. This intimate account provides a deeper understanding about the transformative nature of internal conflict as George discovers how to reconcile identities. Ultimately, it is hoped this story allows others to reflect on the challenges artists have when reshaping their identities in order obtain financial stability.

His foot pushes open the hotel door. His left hand clutches a trumpet case, his right hand grips a stack of papers. As the crowd jostles him, he glimpses Rob Ruthers.

"You sent a sub last time!" He reaches for Rob's handshake and his papers tumble to the carpet. Yawning, he nods sheepishly.

"It's just not the same when there's a sub on the jazz book," says Rob as he continues down the hall.

George struggles to keep his eyes open. He picks his papers off the carpet. *Educational Psychology 416*. Due Monday. He stuffs them into his pocket. It's a paper he wrote for a course he is taking to complete his Bachelor of Education degree. Two weeks ago, at 2:30 a.m., he awoke Cindy, his wife, to type a case study report because she was a fast typist.

Nearly everything in the elegant ballroom is a shade of white or black, including the jarring carpet design; fifty-one black tables and white balloons along the walls. George crosses the dance floor and takes his seat, second from the right in the back row. He opens his folder and glances at the set list: jives, cha-chas, polkas, tangos, waltzes, mambos, rumbas, fox trots and swing tunes. He finds a pencil in his pocket and checks each tune while putting them in order. Number 1, *Sophisticated Swing*, starts the dance, and *In the Mood* ends the first set.

The lead trumpet player buzzes his lips and nudges George with his left knee. George slides his pencil onto the stand. Gently, he lifts out a shining gold-plated Bach 10 ½ C mouthpiece from his case. He buzzes it with a turned-down embouchure. He had purchased his Bach Strad trumpet twenty-five years ago for \$275.00 from a retired musician. Yawning, George lays Al Cass valve oil under his stand. Couples charge the room like teenagers at a rock concert.

George slumps in his chair with his eyes half-closed. A lean man with an athletic build, he has the introspective squint of an avid reader. High cheekbones and a symmetrical face reveal a warm and friendly personality. Though he has a receding hairline, the hair above his forehead stands upward like a rooster's comb. He removes the blue polo fleece sweater covering his tuxedo.



Yesterday, he practiced lip trills in the kitchen, but the phone interrupted. He practiced every day to maintain chops of steel. As a freelance musician and leader of his own quintet, phone calls were important. But there was limited to finish assignments, teach trumpet students

and spend time with his wife and 2 kids. Already he had forfeited early morning practice for university demands.

George has played Salsa gigs where dancers were excellent but the music a challenge. It was painfully loud and not lucrative. Sometimes, George stayed until four a.m. because the promoters would not pay him until the dancers had finished partying. Once, he performed a wedding with his group on an Indian Reservation. He played high, loud, and fast. He got lost several times because the chorus went on and on. During rests, he swatted mosquitoes against the walls behind him.

"Welcome," says Rob. "We hope everyone has a wonderful time."

Rob waves his hands and counts to four. The bass leads and George picks up his straight mute. Together, the band plays *Sophisticated Swing*. Dancers stream onto the dance floor. George's hand trembles as he pushes the valves. The tempo is a slow swing and he nails the notes despite his lethargy. He leans back and peers at dancers. During the sixteen bar rest, he grins at the alto player taking his second chorus. A couple glides by and his eyes return to the chart.

Before George and Cindy married, they danced all the time. During their dating phase, he held her for hours. He kissed her sleepless eyes and wanted her to be his wife. His wedding was still a vivid memory, especially since his in-laws chose not to attend. This broke Cindy's heart. Afterwards, when the doctor confirmed her pregnancy, her parents were ecstatic. But after the first university term, Cindy exclaimed, "I feel like a single parent now that you're in school."

George's head and Rob's hands are in sync for *Tiny Bubbles*. Upside down dancers glide across the ceiling mirror. Relentlessly, the trombones push their slides up and down. George finds his Harmon mute and licks it. He taps his foot and angles the trumpet in his mouth. As he releases a valve, his eyes widen. George nods one, two, three and resolves late. The fourth trumpet player frowns as they file the music away. White-faced, George flips to *Tuxedo Junction*. Trombones play with plunger mutes. "You're certainly not your jolly self," says the fourth trumpet player.

Last Tuesday, leaves blew across campus. George sat in communications class where members had to read an excerpt or short story with presentations skills. He read a passage from a Dorothy Parker novel where two characters commented about people in China.

"I'd like to say something and maybe it's just me," Joyce comments to the Asian instructor, "but after George read, it got uncomfortable in here."

"What do you mean, Joyce?"

"Well, think about what George read."

Softly, he utters, "Perhaps I made a mistake, I mean, ending the passage where I did."

"I think it could be misinterpreted."

"I don't want people to feel offended," says Joyce turning toward three oriental females.

"I wonder if you interpreted Parker the way it was intended," George says. Class members shove books into their bags while others put their coats on.

Her face red, Joyce glanced at the instructor. "I just wonder, the words said something and I don't want anyone to be hurt."

"I'm not sure it was intended that way," says the instructor. "Dorothy Parker wrote the passage that was intended to make us reflect on her statement."

"Perhaps I ended in the wrong spot," George repeats.

"I wonder, Joyce," the instructor asks, "I guess you are worried about whether the four of us are hurt or offended?"

"Yes," Joyce replies.

"I can only speak for myself but if you are asking if I am okay, I am okay," the instructor says.



Rob retards to a cadence. George fidgets and files the piece away. Randy Starsby arranged the next tune, *String of Pearls*.

"This is the one I always mess up," George mutters.

Rob counts one, two, three, four. George bounces to the beat. With both hands, he raises the mic. He closes his eyes. The bass is the motor. Counting the pulses, he breathes and advances to the mic. George performs the traditional Bobby Hackett written solo. His solo is strong and clean. The audience claps as he rests in his chair. Looking triumphant, he extends his left hand to the fourth trumpet player who slaps it. His shoulders straighten and eyes widen. Leaning down, he slides in his straight mute.



George had not made apple pie in months but it was his family's favorite dessert, especially if served with a wedge of cheese or whipped cream. The recipe was an old family secret that had been around for generations. Though George had baked pies for Cindy when they dated, she had to marry into the family to learn how to make the pastry herself. George uses 1/4 cup of sugar, but no spices. He does not knead the pastry too much, only enough to form a ball. It was important not to overuse the rolling pin. He rolled from the center out until he had the necessary size. He knew exactly how to create the pastry.



"I quit. I quit!" shouted George after the communications class ended.

George snatched his videotape, knapsack and left class. Two steps at a time, he galloped down four flights of stairs. He raced to his bike and unfastened the lock. Hurling himself onto his bike, he pedaled like a madman down the hill.

Later in their bedroom, Cindy views the videotape of what George had read in class. He lifts up the phone but lowers it back on the receiver.

Cindy says, "You did nothing wrong, George. I think Joyce took it wrong."

Clasping his stomach, George dashes to the bathroom. He unzips his pants and rushes to the toilet. But there is no release. His image in the mirror staggers. George tumbles backward with a thundering crash.



Autumn Leaves. In a minor key, the tune starts on beat two. A perfect fourth leads into a D minor seventh chord. George folds his hands behind his head.

*The falling leaves drift by the window
The autumn leaves of red and gold
I see your lips, the summer kisses
The sunburned hands I used to hold*

George plays all the way through and there is resounding applause. He beams and turns to *In the Mood*. Couples sway with energy and vigor. The saxes shake with the jive while dancers come alive. He pushes one valve, then two together. As two saxes stand and solo, George lifts the mic and stands close to it. The band softens while George plays loudly. As the audience claps, he sits and stretches the muscles of his face. The music beats while dancers repeat. Finally, all four trumpets stand and play loudly. The tune ends after a run of eighth notes. A loud shout erupts from the audience. George wipes his lips with his right hand and slides his trumpet into his case.

"Thanks, everybody, we will take a short break," says Rob.

George glances at his watch. It is 10:15 p.m.

"You okay?" asks the fourth trumpet.

"Just tired."

"You seem a little off."

"Yeah," says George.

"No jokes tonight?"

"I'll work on it."

"We all have bad nights, as if the audience cares."

"Yeah."

"Don't beat yourself up."



George awoke to bright lights. A hot towel was burning his forehead. A woman's voice spoke.

"Hi George."

"Where am I?"

"In the hospital. You fainted and your wife called an ambulance."

"Geez."

"How do you feel?"

"I've been better."

"What do you do, George?" asked the nurse.

"I'm a musician."

"My cousin is a musician. He plays the piano but doesn't faint."

"I play the trumpet. Usually lead or jazz chair. That's second trumpet."

"You need to take care of yourself, George."

"I've been doing more than performing this year. I'm back at university getting my education degree so I can teach music in high school. I don't sleep anymore."

"Not good."

"I had to find another way to support my family."

"Yes, my cousin is a postman too."

"I do not know any musician who lives solely by playing gigs anymore."

"My cousin was on welfare when his wife worked. But then they had kids."

"Oh."

"His wife wanted him to be a teacher, but he didn't."

"Yes, those who can't find gigs, teach."

"Oh?"

"There is an old saying: 'Those who can't play, teach.' It meant that those without high-quality performing ability had to teach."

"Oh."

"But for me, teaching is about, 'Those who can't gig.' Since there are slim opportunities to play, I must teach."

"That's your reason?"

"Well," George pauses, "the music business has dried up in the last ten years."

"You need to take it easy. You gave your family quite a scare."

"I guess I didn't know what I could handle this year. It's been intense. And I haven't been a student for fifteen years."

"I'll get your family. They're anxious to see you."



George had not informed many friends about his return to university. Musicians might not hire him for gigs if they knew he attended school.

Rob announces the male singer. George checks his music, number 780, *Cab Driver*.

*Cab driver, once more 'round the block
Never mind the tickin' of the clock
I only wish we could have had a talk --
Cab driver, once more 'round the block.*

He drags his chair forward and wipes his lips. Listening, he sways with the dancers. He smiles, opens the two-page chart and pushes the spit valve. Usually, he tells the trumpets when to ad lib "POW!" into the chart. Raising his trumpet in a calm melancholy to play the eighth notes, he nods the beats. The singer says "cab driver" and George says "POW!" A loud echo of his voice is heard. Suddenly, the trumpets shout POW in the third chorus. George's face reddens.



"George, we're here."

"Hi Dad," says Martin.
Emma hugs him and hands him a Coffee Crisp chocolate bar.
George laughs. "Thanks."
"How are you?" asks Cindy.
"I'm fine."
"That was some fall."
"Fall?"
"Don't you remember?"
"No."
"You fell in the bathroom and I called an ambulance."
"I must have been really out of it."
"Completely. You wouldn't wake up."
"I don't remember."

"The doctor said you fainted from exhaustion," Cindy says while patting his leg,. "but you're going to be fine."

"I'm sorry. I thought I could handle it all, but the workload's too heavy. I know it's been hard on you and the kids."

"Yes, it's been an adjustment."

"I worry about the kids in morning and after-school daycare."

"It's okay, George." Cindy caresses his left hand.

Dear, sweet Cindy. She is downright beautiful. Most men find her auburn hair appealing. Her fresh, clear complexion and her glasses highlight her blue eyes. It is obvious he has been granted a rare gift. Her no-nonsense attitude toward others demonstrates her pragmatism, compared to his off-the-wall humor.



Rob conducts them directly into *Taking a Chance on Love*. The female singer struts up to the mic. George rubs his eyes.

*Here I go again
I hear those trumpets blow again
All aglow again
Taking a chance on love*



He is lost in fresh memories of their lovemaking. Cindy's dense shadow reflects on the ceiling. She shifts and sighs. The moonlight fringes her eyelashes and for one perfect moment, she is totally his. He has to go slow in spite of his urgency. More than anything, he wants to please her. Stroking her skin, he buries his face in her flowery perfume. He smiles, wets his tongue and kisses her neck. Gently, he places her skin between his teeth and nibbles softly until she gasps against him. She moans as her right hand undoes the buttons on his shirt. Her fingers gently caress the hairs on his naked chest. He rises slowly, removes his jeans in one motion and pulls her pants off her narrow hips. He guides the pants over the curves of her legs and catches his breath upon the sight of her pale skin. Drawing her close, he recites his mantra: *Wait, go slow. Wait, and go slow.* But with a steady rhythm, her arms unfold toward him. His penetration and her welcome cry spark a surge of electric rapture.

Last week, George and Cindy celebrated the anniversary of their first kiss. He burned some candles and played the trumpet for her.

*Kiss me once and kiss me twice and kiss me once again,
It's been a long, long time.
Haven't felt like this, my dear, since can't remember when,
It's been a long, long time.*

In class, the day before, he had struggled to calculate the years. They had met in Boston and gone out as friends to several concerts. At the seventh concert, on a Saturday, he invited her to see his favorite movie, *Dr. Strangelove*. Afterwards, they strolled five miles from Harvard to the Conservatory and talked about how the movie had shocked her. Then, as they walked over the Harvard Bridge and Charles River, there was a shooting star in the sky.

"Make a wish," she urged him.

Immediately, he kissed her. He later confessed his wish was to kiss her. Twenty years later, he still wonders what her wish was.

Last June, Cindy shed tears. She announced she had lost her job of fifteen years. The office would relocate to Calgary. For eleven and a half years, she had been the executive assistant to two managers, and for three and a half years, she had been the credit administrator. She had held lateral positions and was responsible for customer service, lease maturities, lease terminations and insurance losses. Afterwards, Cindy had secured a contract as administrative support to a Public Consultation Project, where she supported the project manager. The project would end November 30th.

Early in their marriage, they had survived on six hundred dollars a month. Now, faced with growing financial concerns, he was forced to make a career change. Cindy and George stayed up late many nights trying to figure out what to do. Though she suggested he work in customer service, he felt this would lower their standard of living. His best career route, he concluded, was to pursue teaching in public schools as becoming a music educator might support their lifestyle. Cindy agreed and so he applied to the university teacher education program and was accepted.



The break ends and George sits. The last set begins with number 627, *Hotcha cha cha*. As Rob gives the downbeat, George glances at the ceiling mirror to watch the dancers *cha cha* upside down. Rob plays the claves as the first trumpet pulses on the maracas. George laughs when the first trumpet covers his head with a black cloth. Audience members giggle, then clap. Onto the next tune, number 152, *Little Brown Jug*.



"It's okay, we'll manage George."

"I feel bad the way things have gone, Cindy. I miss my time with you and the kids."

"We'll work things out. It's just one year."

"I don't have enough time for everything. And doing homework at 9:30 p.m. is rough."

The doctor arrives and shakes George's hand. "Glad you feel better George, but you need to get some sleep," he urges. "You fainted from complete exhaustion. Your wife says you're attending university while being a freelance musician."

"Yes."

"All I can say is you need sleep."

"But I have class in the morning."

"You cannot go on without sleep. I'll write your teachers a note," the doctor laughs.

"Thanks," smiles George.

"It's 2 a.m. We all need sleep," Cindy says.

"Yes, and there will be changes. I need to make things better for all of us."



There is a faint beat from the drummer. George looks confused. As the trumpets play, his eyebrows rise. Without hesitation, he blows the last few notes with his plunger mute. Rob announces number 749, *Sing, Sing, Sing*.

"We'll play a tune with a swing tempo," says Rob, "it's coming back and it sounds like this."



George completes his thirteen-student teaching practicum. Students at his placement school enjoy his classes and are excited that he is their student teacher. When he conducts the

jazz band, they are particularly responsive. He even teaches one saxophone player to improvise.

“Do you have to leave after thirteen weeks?” a student asks.

“Well, that’s the end of my practice teaching, but I’ll be back to visit you as a teacher-on-call,” he assured.

“That’s cool.”

George is interviewed and hired as a teacher-on-call for the school district. He accepts this position because when a teacher-on-call has an assignment for four consecutive days without interruption, he is paid on scale on the fourth day retroactive to the first day of assignment. This is financially lucrative since he has a masters’ degree and in a higher salary category. In fact, he heard of a teacher-on-call who net four thousand dollars in a month’s worth of work.

As a teacher-on-call, he plans to continue working as a performing artist, although he needs to find time to practice and stay sharp. At this point, he does not want a contractual teaching position that would involve extra responsibilities: concerts, tours, festivals, report cards, fund-raising, parent-interviews, etcetera. Being on-call provides financial stability while allowing him the freedom to continue being a professional musician. He looks forward to combining both careers as teaching in a classroom is more enjoyable than he expected. He finds teaching music can be rewarding and satisfying as he enjoys watching the students grow and change. In fact, after being a teacher-on-call for a couple of years, he might ground himself in a full-time music position depending on the school program.

But there are still four more months of university classes. After that, he can spend more time with his family and plan a trip with them.



During the sax solo, George wipes his lips with his right hand. Trumpets are on the beat and hold the ending together. His eyes blur. The drummer religiously beats a solo as dancers twist and twirl. They move, *presto* and *presto*. The drum solo ends with a *diminuendo*. There is repetition as George breathes harder and faster. His eyes close during the last sixteen bars. There is a loud shout and huge applause. George sighs. “You can tell your grandchildren you did the swing,” says Rob. “We will take another short break.”

George turns to the trumpets and says, “At least I made it this far.”