

Title: "Crescendo"  
Author: Brittani Miller  
School: University of Illinois at Springfield

Previous publication info: Miller, Brittani. "Crescendo." Pink Panther Magazine, 8 Mar. 2021, pp. 44-46.

## “Crescendo”

Standing behind the checkout counter, you flip through a trashy magazine and listen to the drizzle against the windows and the sounds of cars passing by on the highway. Only a handful of customers had come in today, most of them quickly popping in for gas and snacks on the way to some big family dinner. Presently, a man appearing to be in his mid-thirties peruses the Hostess aisle, and you watch his quiet stalking of the snack cakes over the top of an article titled “7 Sexy Gifts to Surprise Your BF.” Maybe you’re being overly cautious, but you don’t take your eyes off of him as he and his Twinkies disappear into the drink coolers. When he emerges, you carefully fold your magazine and ask if he found everything okay.

“Yeah, just stopped in for some snacks for the kiddos. Twenty-five dollars on pump five.” You nod and punch the charges into the cash register. The man inserts his card into the card reader and, without looking up, asks, “You have any plans today?”

You know he is just making small talk but try to keep the discomfort out of your voice as you bag his snack cakes and drinks. “You’re looking at them.”

The register beeps and he removes his card from the machine. As he takes the bag from your hand, your skin brushes his and you try not to breathe; this is unnoticed by him, as he offers you a small smile and says, “Well, I hope you get off soon so you can spend some time with your family. Happy Thanksgiving.” And with that, he is out the door and climbing into the front seat of a waiting minivan, kissing his wife before merging back onto the highway.

#

By the time your replacement gets there, the wind has picked up, signaling a much heavier storm to come than could be typically expected in late November. Some of your hair falls from out of your messy bun and the thick raindrops made it stick to your jawline. It reminds you of the way someone may deliver bad, but necessary, news to a person who was not yet prepared to hear it – it may come down slowly, but in the end everyone is still standing in a puddle. You sit in your car watching the rain for what feels like hours before finally convincing yourself to take the walk across the dreary parking lot. When you do step out, the crisp air of fall melting into winter hits you alongside the drizzle, and you feel startlingly awake at the touch.

You slip your arm through the handles of your grocery bag – a little tote filled with turkey slices and canned vegetables in what was surely the most pathetic feast that would make your grandfather turn in his grave to see – and click the lock button on your key fob before beginning your trek through the swamp of the cracked asphalt. The parking lot was mostly empty, as it is Thanksgiving weekend and most of the occupants of the apartment complex were college students or fresh graduates going home to their various relatives for the holidays. Still, you park near the back of the lot where your car regularly sits, and as you walk the early winter winds move freely without anything to block their path. A chill runs down your spine and a stiffness moves up your joints as you reach the building and begin the ascent up to your apartment, as though your own body is protesting your arrival at the damned place.

In retrospect, your day had not been particularly horrible. You used to be a waitress, and that was a nightmare on holidays; working in a gas station on a holiday where people travel usually just meant you had a lot of customers who weren’t your regulars. Really, it gets to be a bit boring and you simply wanted nothing more than to come home and collapse into bed. Something about the dreary, rainy day fills you with tiredness. There was a time when you did not so anxiously long for sleep after work, when you would’ve been spending the holiday with family just like all the other people travelling today. A time before *Him*, and a time before *It*, and a time before all the rain started. You remember the days when your mom would make pumpkin

pie, and your dad would carve the turkey and sneak pieces to you and the dog when nobody was looking. You would all try not to acknowledge the mass chaos of twenty-five people in one house eating dinner together, because in the end it was worth it to share each other's stories and recap the year together. You reach your apartment and snap back to reality, shuffling through your pockets to find the door key.

Inside your apartment is cluttered and messy; not in filth, but in a disorganized arrangement of belongings. A couple jackets thrown over a chair here, stacks of books that never quite made it to a shelf there, remotes and forgotten mail and an army of empty water bottles on every surface. You throw your keys onto the coffee table, knocking a couple of water bottles into the floor, sit the grocery bag in the fridge, and walk numbly toward the back of the apartment where your bed is nestled into a small, cluttered bedroom. You know you need to clean, even if it is just to tidy up a little bit. If your room had looked like this in high school, your mother would have grounded you for weeks. You often think, *'Maybe I'll clean tomorrow'* or, *'This weekend, this weekend for sure.'* You peel off your rain-soaked coat, drop it on the floor and flop back onto your bed, eyes closed and hands crossed over your chest like a corpse.

There was a time when this bed was a safe haven to you; when you didn't know what it was like to want so badly to climb out of its sheets or how it felt when he had entangled you in them. Now, you felt a chaos of claustrophobia and comfort in the room: comfort only in the fact you were surrounded in the material comforts of blankets and pillow, but claustrophobia in the horror of now knowing what it's like to be unable to escape them.

The bed feels oddly empty now, even as you shift to lie spread-eagle on the duvet. You remember being a child, making snow angels outside with the neighbor kids. You spent what felt like hours forging your way through a foot of snow, pelting each other with snowballs and laughing harder than you ever had before or after. You hid when your parents tried to call you in and promised to be friends forever. As you think about it, you long for that innocence, for the days when monsters lived only under the bed. Before the monsters learn to crawl out and attack you while you're sleeping. You rolled over onto your side, your hands folded under your head as you stare out at your room and the empty walls that had, at one point, held so many pictures of a life you had once longed for... now, your walls were just blank. It never felt more empty than trying to replace the pictures in the frames, so you just took the frames away altogether. Your eyes fall from where they stared at the wall, and you turn your gaze at something you have long forgotten about. Nestled between the mess of your desk and the corner wall, is a little black, cloth case. You feel your breath catch slightly as you remember what the case houses.

You acquired the instrument some years ago, back when you still spent holidays at home. It was an expensive whim, but you loved music fiercely and needed something to distract you in your downtime. People told you that hobbies were a good thing, so you went out and purchased the first hobby you could think of. You always wanted to learn how to play an instrument anyway, though you didn't have the faintest idea what you were doing or where to even go; but, you ended up in a Guitar Center with a couple hundred dollars and very little self-control amidst the first of many breakdowns. He had driven you there and taken the instruments out of the store in his own hands. Still, it was yours. It remained yours, even now. He never learned to strum correctly and He scoffed at the little four-stringed neck. *Maybe*, you had considered, *it was the one pure thing he could not take from me.* And maybe you just needed to make peace with that.

Your mood shifts slightly, perking up like a dog seeing a bone. You can hear the wind picking up outside, rain crashing against your window now as you swing your legs off the bed

and sit upright. You stare over at the little black case for a moment, deciding if you really want to take a plunge into something that could either heal or destroy. You thought back to the slow, careful way you'd unzipped that case the first night, when He finally let it over into my hands. Something holy that would soon be gouged in scratches and frayed strings. The way you pulled the instrument from its case that day was like Arthur pulling the sword from the stone. The little wooden instrument had shined in the kitchen lights, innocent and untouched as it had yet to be played. You feel a lump begin to form in your throat as you stare into the corner, unblinking. Your heart begins pumping harder than the rain on the windowpane. You rise to your feet, legs slightly wobbly as though they are not prepared to carry so much weight. You cross the room and take the black case in my hands, returning it to my bed and stripping the fabric off to reveal the dark, carved wood that rested inside.

You assume that many people find music itself to be a cathartic experience, and you are no exception. Whether listening to it through headphones or playing it on an instrument – though, admittedly, playing it yourself has become your favorite – you once found that music was often the best distraction from anything bothering you. That is, you guess, what people meant when they said to get a hobby. As you unearthed the wooden body from its fabric coffin, your fingers gently brush the strings and you sit back on the bed.

Third finger, fourth string, third fret. Strum, down down up up down up. Third finger, fourth string, second fret. Second finger, second string, second fret. First finger, third string, first fret. Strum, down down up up down up. You touch the wooden body like you would touch another person, the way someone might feel for another human's skin for the first time. First finger, third string, first fret. Second finger, first string, second fret. Strum, down down up up down up. You hum softly in your throat, like a cat purring. Closing your eyes, you can feel yourself begin to drift off to the tune.

You had learned to play this song the day you went to Guitar Center. A beautiful song, it told the tale of two lovers who hadn't quite had their paths cross yet. Eventually, they do meet each other. You can still remember those early days, though, when the strings still ripped open your cuticles from their unadulterated usage. The day you had learned to play this song, and you sat alone in your room and plucked away at the instrument until your fingers bled. You struggled to remember the words sometimes, and even today you can sing along but often forgot how the lyrics go for the second part of the story. Occasionally, you will get off track if you aren't focusing on how your fingers move. You followed YouTube tutorial after YouTube tutorial until you finally managed to create something resembling a song.

Third finger, fourth string, third fret. Strum, down down up up down up. Third finger, fourth string, second fret. You are rusty, and have to keep reminding yourself of the proper hand movements as the chords progress, or else you'll forget. Second finger, second string, second fret. First finger, third string, first fret. Strum, down down up up down up. Your chest seems to tighten, your breath picking up as you feel your eyes begin to sting back tears. You sway ever so slightly as you play the chords, trying to keep yourself focused without drifting off again. You *have to* finish this song.

You had wanted to study music in college but took a gap year to plan your wedding. Your gap year turned into two, then three, then four... you sometimes wish that you had stayed in school. You struggle with it often, thinking about how much you let Him take from you and now you have given Him part of your future as well. You wonder sometimes if He ever drives by the gas station and wonders how you are doing without him. You wonder if he ever wishes he had the nerve to come in and apologize.

You are pulled out of your thoughts by the gross clang of a wrong chord and the sudden jolt of the bed shaking. You are angry – hot tears stream down your cheeks, sweltering like flames. You are angry at the memory, at the song, at Him, at the damned instrument itself and the way it could never sound the same after It had happened. You continue strumming, far too aggressively, furious tears falling down your cheeks and rolling down the sleek wooden body of the instrument. Maybe if the strings break your cuticles open, maybe then you could at least have an excuse for this ache in your chest. A sharp wind blows through the room and the bed shakes again, the earth seems to quake as the window burst open with your fevered strums. Third finger, fourth string, third fret. Strum, down down up – the entire room shook. Posters fall from the wall, the door slams shut, the bed continues to shake harder and harder. For a moment, you are in shock. Your hands stop moving.

You can remember now a time when you were young and back home with your parents. There were earthquakes clear out to the Midwest. You had been lying in your little bed, clutching your favorite teddy bear, when you were startled awake by the mattress quivering with the entirety of the old house. *This is it*, you had thought, *the world is ending*. The shaking filled your little body and came out as equally shaky lips and horrid sobs. When the Earth finally stopped moving and you managed to slip out of bed and into the living room, you found your parents huddled on the sofa, watching the news and wondering what was happening to the world. This was, perhaps, the first moment when you knew you were not completely safe, and perhaps you never could be safe again. Not even in your own home, in your own bed, are wrapped around your favorite teddy bear.

You let out a defeated wail as you begin to strum again, the first of many sobs that are to come. You feel your energy coming in angry spurts, filling up your veins with fire and then dying down to numbness like cold saline. If you could make your sobs louder you would, you would let them consume the entire Earth like the earthquakes. You would make sure He heard them, and saw the crevices left in the destruction. You strum one last time, watching your belongings scatter around the room like a tornado of soundwaves and you do not wonder why you ever stopped playing the instrument. You had given up control long ago, and the long-forgotten discipline of playing haunted you like a ghost, like Him, barely there, but still everywhere in the back of your mind.

You release the instrument and let it ring out a hollow note as it hits the floor.