

ELLE PERRY

Chewing on White Bread

Piano Lessons with Gehrman

His loud, Russian accent digs into my ears like a butter knife spreading the wrong way. “Eating is good after piano, don’t you think? Nice thick bread!” He drizzles honey over the top of his slice and takes a bite. “You want? You want honey with your bread?” he asks, smiling through a mouthful of sticky honey. His energetic eyes and honey-covered hands make him seem just a year younger than me. He pushes the honey into my hands, nodding his head excitably. “Honey is good! Do not be shy! You like honey?”

“I—”

“You like honey!” Gehrman claps a hand on his chest, smiling. “I knew you would! Just like Gehrman!”

It seems I like honey. So I pour on some honey and take a bite of the lumpy white bread, looking from the spray of crumbs on the counter to Gehrman’s wrinkled face. His eyes never leave me as I chew and I squirm a little in my seat.

Week after week, I’d go to piano lessons. First the keys. I’d pound on them on my own. Then Gehrman’s scarred fingers would come over mine, his nails pressing into my knuckles as he played the right notes. I’d again pound on the keys and in

his thick Russian accent, he'd pound into my memory, "You bulldozer! Do not bulldoze the keys! You love the keys; you are gentle with the keys!" After lovingly pounding on the keys, there would be bread. Every week, a fresh loaf would be waiting in his kitchen with, of course, a bottle of honey.

I kick my sneakers against the rungs on my barstool. "Gehrman?" I say, watching his long, silver eyebrows twitch as he nods. "Why do you make me bread all the time?"

The *Tom and Jerry* tape skips on his old TV set, fizzling out to static. I look over my shoulder to see Terzi stepping on the remote. Her tail wags as she steps on it again and the Mozart music comes back on.

"Do you not like Gehrman's bread?" he says, his face falling. "I make bread white for you! It is good bread!"

I nod. "But don't you get tired of bread? You make it every week. You should try making something good. Something new."

My dear, dear piano teacher frowns and glances down at his counter dusted over in flour and bread crumbs. "I am tired of brown bread," he says. "But if you are tired of white bread, next week, I make bruschetta. I make something new!" he taps his graying temple with his crooked fingers, saying, "Your mom teach me how and I learn. I learn because I teenager! I know how!"

"When I grow up and I'm a teenager, will I know how?" I say, sitting up in the barstool.

"A teenager? Yes, yes, they know everything! And when you teenager, you like white bread!"

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Now I am in middle school, but I still don't like white bread. Gehrman's piano lessons are over; I'm in another house, another state away. Phone calls have come and gone, new teachers and more teachers with new notes and new pianos—

and phone calls with the same old news. But this phone call is different. Mom's never sounded worried like that before. Mom's never whispered like that before.

A funeral. We'll be going to Gehrman's funeral soon.

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Today was the funeral. My first one. I didn't know they did these sorts of things in a church. There's so much I didn't know about Gehrman. He almost gave up his life for music. It wasn't until today that I learned why he walked the way he did and why his fingers were as crooked as they were and why his hatred for brown bread kept up until his dying day.

Two Elementary Schools Apart

She doesn't come near me anymore. Five feet of space has become the unspoken rule. It makes sharing a room kind of difficult, especially when there's only one bed that seems hardly five feet across to begin with.

She goes to Mom to do her hair in the mornings now, pesters Dad for help with homework, and only pulls out our toys when her friends come over. Our Cabbage Patch dolls are getting dusty, all stuck in a bin at the back of our closet. And our books—we used to sit for hours together as I'd try to teach her to read—are untouched, their covers now stiff.

"She's well past five years old, the other kids would've started piano lessons by now. Maybe focusing on something else would take her mind off school," Mom says. Kate sits at the far end of the counter, too busy with her spelling words to hear. I look up from my book. Mom and Dad keep whispering lately. They're not very good at it. But practice makes perfect, so they keep trying anyways.

"Piano's like learning another language. She can't even—"

"Dad, how do you spell bread?" Kate says, staring down at her worksheet.

He shoots Mom a look as if proving his point. But he stops and sighs out the letters.

I look over at Kate's paper, noticing she spelled it "D - R - E - A - B." Mom says her brain switches letters sometimes when she reads. "Your Bs and Ds are wrong," I start. "if you switch them—"

"I didn't ask you." She glares at me and shoves her paper in her school bag.

The walk to school the next day is the same as any other. We jump over the irrigation ditch and tramp through our neighbor's yard, a string of elementary kids putting on grass stains like makeup in preparation for the day. We get to the dirt road just before the first bell. I turn with the rest of the neighbor kids, but my little sister keeps walking. She crosses the road. She passes the goats.

"Kate!" I call after her. "Kate, where are you going?"

Kate turns. "I'm going to a different school now. Mom thinks I'll like the other one better."

Five feet suddenly becomes a thousand. That night in bed, with the blankets bunched up between us almost a mile thick, I fix a smile to my face. I'm determined to make that thousand-foot distance smaller. Maybe just five feet again. I fire off questions about her new school: if she likes her teacher, if her homework is easier, if their library is bigger.

She cuts me off, "I don't know."

I pause. I look at the wall of blankets between us, then turn the other way to see my school book sitting on my nightstand. I reach for it, smiling. Kate has always liked the stories I used to tell her at night. "Is your class reading any good books?" I ask, thumbing through the pages. "My class just started a new one called *Hatchet*. It's about this kid who gets stuck in the wild because his plane crashes and—"

"All you do is read. It's no wonder you don't have friends."

The book shakes a little in my hands. The title's bold print stares up at me. It's never looked quite so blurry before. A big

wet spot splats down in the middle of the letter “H,” turning a thousand feet into two thousand.

At the funeral, someone told me a story about Gehrman. He grew up in Russia. I could have guessed that from his accent, so it seemed redundant that the man would tell me, but he said it anyway. When Gehrman was a boy, he didn't have anything to eat. He lived off of pumpkin seeds for a year. I think that's why he liked honey on his bread so much. Some nights, he would lie on the floor by his mother, waiting for death. Starvation made Gehrman's legs weak and that's why he walked with a bow-legged shuffle.

Bread for a Hungry College Student

It's the end of my first semester at college, the end of my first relationship, and the end of my first “almost” failed class. My roommate texted me last week saying she's moving out so she can room with her friend. I probably shouldn't have read as much. That's it.

The homework is piling up. My textbooks are almost four inches thick this time. And for heaven's sake, it's almost 1:00 in the morning . . . where is that Disney music coming from? My new roommate comes in through the door, laughing hysterically with her friend on the phone. She must've walked in on another couple making out downstairs.

I put in my earbuds. The glaring white light of my laptop spits out another phrase: *Conjugar esta oración en el subjuntivo*. More of my Spanish homework flashes across the screen and I type, *Es importante que*—

“They're everywhere!” I hear my roommate saying into her phone.

I continue typing, almost holding my breath . . . *Que aprendas a demostrar amor*—

The Disney music gets louder.

. . . *amor para que otros puedan entenderlo*.

My roommate laughs and puts her friend on speakerphone. I groan, rubbing a hand over my face. My room is loud. The lobby is loud and probably an awkward place to study at the moment. I have so much homework and no friends to help me procrastinate it just a little while longer. Is there any place in this building where friendless people can go on a Friday night when they have nothing better to do but feel sorry for themselves?

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I shut the hymnbook that's lying open, ready to be played, and move it to the top of the piano. It was a quick walk down to the music practice rooms in my building's basement. I forgot how quiet and peaceful it is down here. Pulling out the bench, I sit down and place my fingers over the keys.

I remember Gehrman playing a song that sounded something like this. I lean into the piano, feeling the rhythm sinking into my fingers. I smile as I remember, "Do not pound like a bulldozer! You love the keys! You are gentle with the keys!"

I love Kate. I was gentle with her. I was kind to her. I was kind to my old roommate. I did not bulldoze over them or tear them down. I did the opposite. I built them up.

The music slips from my fingers, too big and too loud to hold inside just piano keys. My nose almost touches my clenched up hands as I play, the weight of misunderstood love bending me in half. My mind is churning, my heart racing, and my fingers flying, all to try and fill that empty space inside me. Kate's face flashes into my head. Then my old roommate's. Then Gehrman's. Why do they not understand how I say "I love you, I care about you, and I want to be there for you when you need me?" Why can't I understand when they say it back?

The notes jumble together, a perfect discord that runs blindly into a heap of ugly noise until my hands are almost on top of each other, the music groaning, grating, and grumbling to

be understood. But I can't keep up with it and I can't understand it and I can't—I just can't figure out how to say “I love you.”

My chest caves in on that empty space inside me.

I can hear my trembling breath ringing in that deafening silence, echoing against the last few notes still sloughing off the piano's strings. I listen to the silence. A quiet calm comes over me and I can feel it. Just after that horrible storm of music I'd pounded out on the piano, a softer sound echoes into my heart, filling that empty space inside me.

My white bread never comes out of the oven at the right time. It's always too burnt or too doughy. To get it right would be a miracle, but I just don't know how to do it yet. I hope it gets easier when I'm older. But right now, in this tiny piano room at the bottom of my building, I think I know what it's supposed to taste like.

There were so many scary stories about Gehrman that I'm not sure I believe them. But some things are just too terrible to be made up. After telling me about how Gehrman almost starved to death, the man went on, saying that the KGB captured Gehrman and put him in prison. The only food they gave him were bits of brown bread. Knowing that he was an amazing pianist and loved music, they broke his fingers and threatened to cut them off if he wouldn't stop talking about freedom and human rights.

A Piano in the Corner

A funeral. There is lots of crying and lots of laughing. Love is like that when it leaves. It leaves some crying and some laughing and some empty feeling somewhere in between. People have such different ways of loving. But love is lost on me sometimes. There are too many ways to say it and it's different than learning Spanish.

But here, I think I understand it. Halfway, at least. It's just like any other funeral. There's food afterwards, and little pictures of an energetic, life-loving man lining the path as we wait to give condolences to his wife. Mozart is playing. And there's a piano in the corner. Just a few more minutes of all of these piano students and old friends crying and I'm sure Gehrman will walk through the doors, shuffling his bow-legged shuffle, and sit down at the piano and play. He'll tell us to stop crying and listen to his music.

As just one of his many piano students, I received his famed white bread after each lesson. That is how Gehrman said "I love you." I say it through playing the piano. The music tells me "I love you" when there's no one else to say it. I think Gehrman could hear that too.

I don't hate white bread anymore. It isn't sour, it isn't sweet. It's just . . . hard to chew. Still, love eludes me. I catch its meaning too late. And even though "I teenager," I don't know everything. I'm still learning how to say "I love you" and how to hear it back.