

Sample Draft #1

My Music Teacher

By Joyce Jordan-DeCarbo

My music teacher at the girl's academy *(naming the place might make it more real)* in a rural ~~area in~~ Kentucky was a short, pretty, lady behind a black habit. Only the skin on her face and her hands were visible. ~~and~~ ~~T~~the habit made her seem even shorter and neater than I always imagined she would look in some other kind of garb. She had a contagious smile and a dimple in ~~her left one~~ cheek. *(While specificity of detail is generally something that will strengthen the reader's engagement in the story, in this case the specificity of left or right cheek is probably not necessary and causes the reader to have to stop and think.)*

She was always teaching me other things besides music. I think she realized without ~~my~~ ~~me~~ saying it, that I loved nature. I suspect she knew ~~it~~ before I did, since I knew precious little about myself even though I was in high school. *Here would be a great place to add more personal details about our narrator -- how she looked and why she was so clueless about her own personality and presence in the world. To make the story more complete, we need a clearer portrait of both actors in this drama.*

Might the sister have a name? She used to take several ~~of us~~ girls *how did she pick them?* on long walks in knee deep snow and point out the birds she knew—the tufted

titmouse, the brown thrasher, the catbird. *This paragraph has the potential to be expanded into a telling scene and could be more fleshed out with dialogue and action. Show us these people in the woods -- how they behaved, what they said and didn't say! But the incident I recall most— This self-conscious kind of phrase is best avoided. Instead, set up the day, describe the time of day, the place, the particular events of THAT day and the reader will know another important scene is coming... was the day* I came for my piano lesson, and there was a striking flower arrangement on her table by the piano. ~~I recall that~~ It was oriental in style—one barren branch and at its base, a half-open magnolia bloom. Sister Francesca *(ah hah, now here is her name! I'd put it in sooner.)* proceeded to tell me she was putting together a course on feminism. Participants would learn how to express themselves in various ways, flower arranging being one of those *ways: another word choice here?* She then pulled out some lovely colored scarves and kept holding them one by one near my face. She pulled out a soft pink and said, "There, that's the best color for your skin tone and hair color." She told me my eyes were very expressive.

This entire exchange seemed so strange; a feminist nun seemed kind of ironic. SHOW DON'T TELL. As naïve as I was, I knew she was very courageous to be talking about such things. So while she never was successful in teaching me to relax while playing the piano, her lovely feminist ideas and her attention to me planted seeds in my thinking about the importance of being a woman in my own right. Whatever that meant would not be clear to me for several decades. I still struggle with the metamorphosis, but I know enough to want to thank her for all she gave me. ~~and~~ I still like to wear pink.

Summary Comments

This story has enormous potential as a piece of creative nonfiction. I'd love to see more scenes between our narrator and Sister Francesca so that we better understand what our narrator was like at the time. As it is now written, the author teases the reader with suggestions of so much richer material just underneath. Adding a bird watching scene, perhaps a classroom or dining hall scene, a conversation among the girls about the nuns and their having to go to school there, would all add immeasurably to the power of the final scene with the scarves. The author must earn the power of that final scene with the reader by giving us much more of the events leading up to it. That way, the reader has fully experienced this school along with our narrator. Then the reader, too, may feel herself blushing and pleased with the introduction of pink and the special attention from her teacher.

Rather than explain or summarize the personal significance or irony of knowing a feminist nun, let the events unfold before us so that we as readers may appreciate the irony and curiosity of this experience along with the author, rather than having it explained to us. The writer here has done a wonderful job in a few words of recreating the framework of this memory. If she so chooses, she can make a fuller, richer story that exemplifies how a music teacher has the power to teach so much more, to create memories and a sense of self-esteem in her students that echo through a lifetime. Such influences often come to be associated with a particular sensory experience (in this case the presence of pink) that triggers the memory full force. That is what this story is about. However, rather than making a reasoned academic argument about the potential power of our pedagogy as teachers, why not tell the story fully? Then the author might add analysis and citations from the literature, or she might have a story that would stand alone as a creative work, leaving room for the reader to draw empirical conclusions.

