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### The Glenn Gould Memorial Museum

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Photograph by Richard Ludwig on Unsplash

The Glenn Gould Memorial Museum has four rooms, each filled with artifacts from virtuosic Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's life. For the low price of five dollars—three for seniors and veterans—you can view our collection, and with me as your tour guide. Hello, I'll say, I'm Felicity, a sophomore music major at Chickamauga State University, sole summer intern here at the Glenn Gould Memorial Museum, happy to have you. We'll smile and shake hands, make small talk as we move through the exhibits.

The museum is in Georgia, a state Glenn rarely visited. It opened last month in a town called Amadeus (population 1,090, a small portion of the Savannah Metropolitan Statistical Area), a composer whose work Glenn detested. There are no pianos here, no marked-up scores or signed records. Instead, we have his childhood bicycle's rusted chain, a dog leash, several pairs of unraveling gloves. I'll tell you that when Glenn was a kid, he'd ride his bike five miles out of Toronto to sing to a group of appreciative cows and that when he was touring Europe, he sent a postcard from the Soviet Union to his dog, Banquo (we are currently trying to acquire said postcard from the National Archives of Canada). If you ask, I will tell you, yes, it's true, Glenn did in fact wear gloves inside the studio. He was incurably cold, would wrap himself in coats and scarves even during the summer. I'd like to tell you he had the right idea, insulating himself against this wretched world, but you will probably have walked away by then. You will probably have left the museum, as it takes roughly fifteen minutes to walk through the entire exhibition space.

I'm supposed to tell you how proud we are to call ourselves the only freestanding Glenn Gould museum in the entire world.

You might think the town was named after Mozart, but it was actually named for a local, Amadeus Dumont, who killed himself in 1914 after realizing his piano playing would never quite live up to the expectations implied by his namesake. To say he killed himself, however, is misleading; it was the piano that killed him. I mean this literally. His mother had

been an accomplished pianist in Brussels, but being an accomplished pianist in Brussels did not mean anything, so she and her family moved to rural America, where it meant even less. She watched in jealousy and awe as her husband, who came from humble pig breeders in West Flanders, built a small iron empire that stretched across the Southeastern United States. If she could not achieve musical glory, she decided, becoming ridiculously wealthy would have to be an acceptable salve. She filled their Victorian mansion with instruments she expected her four children to master: a harp in the dining room, a grand piano on the second story landing, and a pianola that played Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata for whenever her children's efforts had become too much to bear.

When he was seventeen, Amadeus paid a group of robust hitmen from a seedy section of Savannah to push the grand piano over the edge of the landing so it would squash him flat. He was not an articulate pianist—his rendering of the *con bravura* section of Chopin's Etude op. 10 no. 3 was, per his mother's diary, muddled by both poor technique and several muttered swear words—but the message he'd meant to convey through his suicide was clear. The family was devastated. They used their influence to rename the town in Amadeus's favor (it was originally called Gooseneck Junction) and ridded themselves of all musical artifacts, from the harp to a stray United Methodist hymnal, until Ms. Tonya, the widow at the end of the Dumont family line, decided to turn the house into this museum.

When a local reporter asked her why, she said the town ought to live up to its name somehow or another, and what better way than to have a museum celebrating the best classical musician of the twentieth century? I am waiting for the day she looks at the barren guest book and asks me to whack her over the head with Glenn Gould's microphone stand. If you take my tour, I will not tell you any of this. I have been instructed not to mention Amadeus Dumont at all.

We'll begin in what used to be Amadeus's bedroom, which now houses a replica of Glenn Gould's own adult sleeping quarters. Aside from the alarm clock and a table lamp, none of the furniture actually belonged to him, but this approximation nevertheless allows you to imagine where the insomniac tossed and turned at night, his brain undoubtedly filled with music so lovely he didn't dare sleep. If you knew anything about Amadeus, you would know that after a botched recital of Chopin's Ballade no. 1 in G Minor (his *appassionato* was not quite passionate enough), he once sat in here with a kitchen knife pressed to his wrist, considering what might happen if he were less afraid. He was fifteen, and it had occurred to him for the first time that not living was a viable option. But you will know nothing of this; instead, you will wonder what else went on in Glenn's bed (wherever it may be, if it has not already been incinerated at some Canadian landfill). You will nudge me and wink; I will laugh politely and tell you he did not have many romantic relationships, that his most important relationship with a female was with his doting mother.

Amadeus's mother, by contrast, did not dote. Perpetually on the verge of detonation, her angry personality did not lend itself well to motherhood. She was incapable of softness in all aspects of life, from parenting to romance to music. Her approach to the piano had allowed her to transcend her gender and earn a small but devout following. They called her the Mad Lady of Brussels; she refused to play polite Baroque composers or those nauseatingly cute impressionists, preferring instead Chopin and Beethoven's most violent compositions. But she did not play the piano so much as torture it, attacking it with such fury that she often ended performances by throwing herself on the ground, sobbing until someone hauled her offstage. Nobody knew what unspeakable pain lent her the ability to interpret Beethoven with such terrifying passion. When asked by a reporter for *La Libre Belgique*, she said the answer was obvious: she was a female pianist in Brussels.

Glenn Gould, as you may know, had a habit of singing while playing the piano. Sometimes the Mad Lady of Brussels would scream.

Securing a page-turner proved difficult for The Mad Lady of Brussels, for they often fled the stage, fearing nothing short of bacchanalian dismemberment. Only one page-turner made it through an entire concert without flinching, ducking, or so much as trembling. Impressed with this display of fortitude, The Mad Lady of Brussels decided to marry him. This man, of course, was Mr. Dumont, and he aspired far beyond turning pages, convincing his wife they'd be both happier and more successful in America. Perhaps he was right; cheated by both geography and genetics, The Mad Lady of Brussels resigned herself to the embarrassing position that only a man could save her, but after surveying her new home in Georgia, all thick swamps and sticky heat, no cathedrals or concert halls in sight, she realized she had been mistaken.

"We might've gone to Vienna instead of here," she'd complain at the dinner table. She did all her fighting at the dinner table, for she liked having an audience. She was used to them.

Her husband's response was always the same: "There's a Vienna, Georgia about two hundred miles west of here. Why don't you pack your bags and go?"

(I have visited my Aunt Nell in Vienna a few times. There isn't much to see aside from the annual Big Pig Jig, Georgia's oldest official barbeque contest, an event for which there are brochures available in the lobby if you're interested.)

If they'd stayed in Europe, they wouldn't have made any money, Mr. Dumont said, a point the Mad Lady of Brussels was always quick to dispute. If they'd stayed in Europe, they could have moved to Vienna, where her murderous Beethoven interpretations would've gained her a cult following and buckets of money and a spot at the Vienna Academy of Music for Amadeus, who would be studying scherzos under the famous Leopold Godowsky rather than repurposing kitchen cutlery in his bedroom.

His mother did not know about the incident with the knife, however. She only knew that her eldest son, the one she'd chosen to live the life she could not, did not want to be a pianist. He was enthralled by Jack London stories and church elders' reminiscences of valiance at Antietam. What really enchanted him, however, was his father's iron foundry, where he hoped to apprentice and eventually take over. His father consented to this plan but was overruled by his wife—she would not allow her only son to dedicate his life to the prosaic trade of making sewer grates.

Being forced into music made Amadeus sulky, a back-talker, someone who cried at the slightest provocation. His mother had passed on her angry piano repertoire to him and did not understand why he couldn't bring it to life with whatever black thoughts haunted him. Impatient with his moods, she gave him Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, a book of music whose name Amadeus correctly perceived as an insult. An instrument was not supposed to be well-tempered. It was supposed to be vicious, insane.

A single note, when played correctly, should be capable of slaughter.

Glenn Gould, of course, is famous for playing Bach, most notably the *Goldberg Variations*. Unfortunately, we do not possess any copies of his scores, but we do have a twelve-page love letter addressed to Gould composed entirely in heroic couplets by a Quebecois woman who was later institutionalized for poisoning her own oatmeal.

Which brings us to the next room in the house: the dining room, whose large windows provide a wonderful view of the front porch, where Mr. Dumont's workers infamously burned him in effigy after he forbade them from unionizing. I'm supposed to tell you that summer is a lovely time to the visit, as from this vantage point you can see the hydrangeas blooming. Aside from the porch, the dining room offers a glimpse into Glenn Gould's personal life. Here, we have various odds and ends: his umbrella, a coat rack, a music box that plays a selection from Strauss's *Salome*.

Hopefully I am not moving too fast. According to an anonymous reviewer on Tripadvisor, I am an efficient tour guide, but I don't give visitors enough time to process things. What is there to process? Here is Glenn Gould's wallet. Here is an antenna from Glenn Gould's television set. Here is Glenn Gould's bowtie from Easter '56. Anything can become a holy relic if you stick it behind glass.

Nobody else has mentioned me on Tripadvisor, but I can provide other references if you're unsure about my qualifications. Teachers who wrote my college recommendation letters have described me as "passionate and driven," someone whose "eagerness to learn, coupled with her dedication to the piano, will make her a worthy addition to the C—Conservatory of Music." The man who would've been my piano professor at the conservatory was famous, had played Rachmaninoff concertos and Liszt rhapsodies in symphony halls across the globe. He might've given me a glowing recommendation, if not of my performance then at least of my appearance, as he made his fondness for me abundantly clear when I met him one-on-one at orientation—so clear, in fact, that I gave up my scholarship to stay home and take

classes at Chickamauga State, the only school still willing to make room for a new student in late July. I could transfer to another conservatory, but I'm not so sure I want to anymore. I don't know if I can spend the rest of my life seated on piano benches next to instructors whose hands are more interested in my body than the keyboard.

To make extra money during the school year, I give campus tours. I gesture at the picturesque mountains looming behind the college, dwarfing our tiny campus, and tell parents not to worry, their kids will be safe here.

But a good tour guide never talks about herself. Let us return to the dining room, my favorite room in the house, a breathtaking example of Victorian architecture: ceilings stenciled in gold and blue, glass doorknobs and a dancing candelabra, a trap door leading to the secret underground passage where the Mad Lady of Brussels was prone to trap Amadeus for several hours whenever he refused to practice or was not playing to her standards. I asked Ms. Tonya if she uses the passage anymore, but she said no, it's currently occupied by a family of mice.

What I won't tell you about the dining room is that it once housed a lovely harp imported from Munich, a sneering gargoyle face carved into its crown. The Mad Lady of Brussels had little use for instruments that could not withstand her abuse, considering them just as spineless and effeminate as Bach, so she relegated the harp to her three daughters. They were destined to be housewives, percussionists specializing in the music of spoons clinking against tea cups, so it was fine if they wasted afternoons strumming the harp. The middle daughter, Elise, surprised everyone by developing a talent for the instrument. She was so talented she eventually moved to Atlanta, then Philadelphia, where she tutored young harpists and played in an orchestra. After that, the Mad Lady of Brussels refused to reply to any of her letters.

The other two sisters, so I'm told, made fine mothers.

My own mother works the front desk at the Chickamauga Battlefield Visitor Center, an important Civil War site in the northwest corner of the state. She points small children toward the restrooms and tells their parents what time the reenactments will begin. When I turned ten, she began working there to save extra money for my future college tuition. She had lavish plans for me: Juilliard, Oberlin, Yale.

And yet, here I am. Museum work must run in the family.

Since Amadeus, Georgia is located six hours away from Chickamauga, I'm staying in Ms. Tonya's spare bedroom. I receive free boarding and meals. We live upstairs; before the Dumont mansion became a museum, it had been broken up into apartments. Two other boarders live with us, a surprisingly modest arrangement for an old money widow. Most of her inheritance has gone into the museum. A single Glenn Gould sock can fetch as much as twenty-thousand dollars. Mrs. Tonya makes me Belgian waffles in the morning, beef bourguignon or steak frites at night. She is proud of her heritage. She encourages me to play the piano on the landing (its wheels removed just in case anyone gets any ideas), but I haven't been able to bring myself to touch it.

While we don't have any of the pianos Glenn Gould played, we have something better—Glenn Gould himself. Yes, an avant-garde sculptor and current student at the Savannah College of Art and Design has created a life-size sculpture of Glenn Gould entirely out of discarded instrument parts. Piano hammer ears, trumpet mouthpiece nose, two-thousand-fifty-seven knotted violin strings for hair. In what used to be the sitting room, a space where Amadeus used to read adventure stories in *The Youth Companion* and imagine himself as their heroes, Glenn Gould stands at a dignified five foot, eleven inches. The Mad Lady of Brussels, by comparison, was an imposing six foot two—without heels, which she often wore as a method of intimidation. Standing at various staggering heights, she'd stalk the streets of Savannah in ball gowns—black and menacing and layered with tulle, like rotted wedding cakes—she'd once worn on stage. Children fled from her presence. Women stiffened their necks and turned the other way. Men whistled and jeered. A woman married to such a prosperous husband should have enjoyed a rich social life, teas at the Oglethorpe Club and summer retreats to Tybee Island, but she was ostracized for her peculiarities. Nobody knew she was the Mad Lady of Brussels. To the residents of Chatham County, she was just the Eccentric of Gooseneck Junction.

Glenn Gould is also remembered by his contemporaries as an eccentric. It is, according to many critics, what makes him so beloved.

If you have done any research into Glenn Gould's life, you will know he grew tired of being considered strange, balked at photographers who wanted to shoot him wrapped in scarves and surrounded by space heaters. I like to tell my tour groups there is no universal constant for normal, no fixed point on which we might pin those people most happily conformed to society's standards. (This line usually gets a somber nod of solidarity, as if the man in khaki shorts and an Old Navy American flag T-shirt knows precisely what I'm talking about.) To Glenn Gould, mittens in July were normal. Hauling his sheet music in trash bags rather than briefcases was normal. To Mr. Dumont, escaping poverty in Europe to exploit it in America was normal. To Amadeus, gazing at cemeteries with intense longing was normal. But for the Eccentric of Gooseneck Junction, absolutely nothing was normal about anything.

And for female conservatory students? Uninvited hands, unwanted lips. Allowing yourself to become a cello, a clarinet, something to be handled. When I told the other girls at orientation what happened with my piano professor, they looked weary, resigned. Welcome to the world of classical music, they said.

To offer our visitors a privileged glimpse into Glenn Gould's concept of "normal," the sitting room features a television that plays *Glenn Gould's Toronto* (1979) on loop, an hour-long informational film in which Glenn wanders his native Toronto while dispersing facts about the city. Hopefully you will come in during Glenn's visit to the Canadian National Exhibition's annual fair. It is an amusing moment in an otherwise dull film. Standing in front of a tilt-a-whirl, a hand (gloved, of course) covering one of his ears, Glenn says he never attended the fair as a child. He says he didn't miss it, that he's never understood why people want to climb up mountains or dive out of airplanes or (here, he trails off, attempting to think of another example) race motorcars, or test their endurance in these—and this is when he turns to the ride spinning manically behind him—ridiculous contraptions. The whole thing, he says, is just a mystery to him.

Such an aversion to fun might lead one to suspect the pianist was depressed, as depression often goes hand in hand with genius, but Glenn Gould was, by all accounts, content with his cloistered lifestyle. He had his own unique standards for fulfillment and, with the exception of a few low periods, mostly surpassed them. It unfailingly strikes me as strange that some people can do this, that they are capable of being happy.

Let us move on. You'll find the kitchen to the left, where Ms. Tonya has generously set up a watercooler and occasionally sells homemade baked goods for a modest price (reviewers on Yelp overwhelmingly recommend the banana nut bread). While it has been suggested by some townsfolk that we should open an in-house restaurant, Ms. Tonya refuses on the grounds of authenticity; Glenn Gould's devotion to the piano bordered on religious and transformed him into an ascetic. Reveling in the contrapuntal glory of Johann Sebastian Bach, he often forgot to eat.

As a teenager, Amadeus also forwent meals. This, of course, was because he wanted to die.

Across from the kitchen is the janitorial closet. Ms. Tonya began presiding over custodial duties after discovering her sole janitor had robbed the museum. In January, Glenn Gould's scarf, which hung on Glenn Gould's coat rack in the living room, had vanished. Ms. Tonya fretted over its disappearance until the next week, when she spotted the janitor wearing it in the Piggly Wiggly, where he was weighing a bag of bell peppers. Her shopping cart rattling with fury, she marched up to him and demanded to know just who he thought he was, stealing a scarf that once belonged to the great Glenn Gould.

"Ma'am," he said, chuckling, "I thought this was just some old scarf somebody forgot."

The Mad Lady of Brussels had a much more unnerving encounter with a thief when she was only nine. This story was infamous in Brussels, having been told at nearly every party and tea she attended. She loved telling this story so much that she sometimes used it as an opening monologue before her performances, a kind of introductory note explaining her unique style. During a notable concert in 1889, she hired two men to tell the story with magic lanterns, their phantasmagoric images dancing on the blank wall beside her as she spoke in low, grave tones about the day that changed her life.

The Eccentric of Gooseneck Junction, eschewed from Savannah's elite clubs and society parties, never had a chance to tell the story except once.

Before the Eccentric of Gooseneck Junction was the Mad Lady of the Brussels, she was only a Little Girl in Kortrijk, a small city so close to the border of France that she sometimes swore she could hear faint sounds from Paris: opera singers warming up their voices, composers experimenting with unwritten melodies, the triumphant final chord of a symphony orchestra. She practiced piano with all the windows open in hopes her music might reach the city. Perhaps some benevolent French music tutor would hear her and whisk her away. While she longed for this fate, her parents feared it—they forbade her from leaving the windows open, arguing it was sure to invite thieves or kidnappers. Only when her father was at work and her mother at the market could she play for her distant friends. Ensuring they heard her, she refused to play below a *fortissimo*.

Even at nine years old, it was clear she was gifted, a regular Marianne Mozart or Fanny Mendelssohn. She played with an emotional maturity far beyond her years, or perhaps beyond her species. When the robber who climbed through the window heard her playing Chopin's Ballade no. 1, her *appassionato* plenty passionate enough, he swore it wasn't a little girl seated at the piano, but an angel.

She had no idea anyone else was in the room until she heard a crescendo of applause behind her. Assuming this ovation was coming from somewhere in Paris, she turned around to curtsey for her phantom audience, but screamed when she saw a man wielding a kitchen knife. She screamed and screamed until she noticed the tears streaking down his face.

"You're crying," she said, eyeing him with suspicion.

"You play so beautifully," he said, sniffing back a string of mucus. In a show of peace, he allowed the knife to fall from his fingers. "I can't believe I was going to kill you."

Like that Little Girl in Kortrijk, the Eccentric of Gooseneck Junction had only one audience member to impress, and it was a matter of life or death. She shared this story with Amadeus after he made one last plea to quit the piano and work at the foundry.

"I play the piano because it saved my life," she said. "It's what keeps me alive."

Amadeus wanted to point out she hadn't touched a piano since they'd arrived in Georgia but thought the better of it.

After a sharp inhale, he confessed, "It's not keeping me alive at all. It's killing me."

Well-versed in stage theatrics, she interpreted this statement as exaggeration. "The foundry is what will kill you. Making pothole covers and fence railings. Is that how you want to spend your life?" When she received only a sullen glare, she said, "Mark my words, the piano will save you."

Amadeus looked at her resolute expression, those black eyes that matched her black dress, and decided he had a point to prove.

Covering the dent in the floor left by Amadeus's hired executioners is our reception desk, where we will end our tour. At this point, please feel free to sign the guest book, leaving behind your name, hometown, and favorite memories from the tour. I will ask if you have any questions, and you will inevitably say no. Nobody ever has any questions.

On slow days, when only one or two people are left at closing, Ms. Tonya might invite them to dinner, as she has a terrible habit of preparing too much beef bourguignon and stuffing it in the back of the refrigerator to mold. The more the merrier, she always says. Her dinner guests, arthritic and frail, will slowly climb the staircase that the Mad Lady of Brussels descended for the last time after Amadeus's funeral, disappearing out the front door, never heard from again. Upstairs, Ms. Tonya will insist I join them for dinner, where I will be subject to shallow interrogation. Where are you from? ("God bless the troops who died there defending the South.") Where do you go to school? ("Kent's boy graduated

from there, didn't he? Or was it Joe's?") How are you liking Amadeus? ("A pretty girl like you can probably get along anywhere, eh?") For the rest of meal, I will mostly smile and nod, trying not to make eye contact, instead looking down at my plate, my fork, my sundress, the hair tie circling my wrist, trying to imagine where they'll end up, what they'd look like behind glass.

Aleyna Rentz is a fiction writer from rural Southwest Georgia. She now lives in Baltimore, where she recently finished her MFA in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in publications including Glimmer Train, Pleiades, Passages North, Wigleaf, and the Best Microfiction 2020 anthology, among others. She won first place in Pleiades' 2019 R.M. Kinder Realistic Fiction contest, and third place in Glimmer Train's Jan/Feb 2018 Short Story Award for New Writers. She currently serves as senior fiction reader for Salamander Magazine and teaches high school.

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