

Perfect Cadence

by

Rebekah Blackmon

Prologue

I detest music. I never want to hear another melody, counterpoint, harmony, rhythm, chord, trill, or tone of any sort. Please allow me to destroy my eardrums and be done with it all. Music has taken hold of me and used me as its evil puppet, and it has ruined my life. Don't speak to me of Chopin or Schubert. Don't let a single hammer strike a piano string in my range of hearing.

What is now my greatest enemy was once my passion. I was—still am—a musician. I am an accomplished pianist and a composer. Before last week, I was always involved in some way with music. It meant more to me than almost anything or anyone.

Let me briefly introduce myself. My name is Paul Stewart. The story that I am about to share with you will not be easy to write, though the memories will give me a momentary feeling of happiness as I let myself forget the present and travel into the past. I wish I could label this story

as fiction, but these are events that have truly occurred and will haunt me for as long as I still have the ability to think.

I want to forget everything that has happened. I wish it were possible. I write these words through blurred eyes and with a troubled soul that can never be comforted. However, I feel this should be recorded.

I've always preferred to live alone. I crave solitude as often as possible. I've only found one exception to this, and that exception will soon be very evident to you. But don't misunderstand me. I'm not a shy person. I can play the role of a social butterfly quite well if I choose. Most people who interact with me see a completely different side of me. They see the daily mask I wear with its painted smile and interested eyes. Though most people like me, the truth is that I'm not very *fond* of social interaction. I find others flawed and boring.

I am in my living room now, sitting at my desk. I purchased the small, mahogany desk at a garage sale a few years ago, and though its flaws trouble me, I could never bring myself to replace it. The large, open window is in front of me letting the warm, moist air softly travel through it, rustling the papers surrounding me. I can hear faint noises of people and cars outside, but only if I listen for them. If I don't, they simply blend to create a familiar background that would only be obvious to me if it were to suddenly fall silent.

The pencil I am using has had a long, interesting life. It is an ordinary mechanical pencil worth no more than a couple dollars to any other person, but to me it is worth millions. My hand has guided the strokes of this very pencil since long before the beginning of this story. I suppose it remembers more about the events than I do; but, unfortunately, pencils cannot write on their own, or else I would prefer it to bear my pain.

Most would say that I am a conceited man. Yes, I suppose that is accurate. I am quite conceited, but I have reason to be. Is it wrong to be aware of one's strengths? Many have told me that I am good-looking, intelligent, and musically talented. I find no reason to be falsely humble.

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I work hard to maintain those traits. I do not leave my apartment if my clothes and hair are unkempt. I read often. I practice the piano diligently.

Well, of course, I no longer play the piano. Not after last week.

You may be wondering what happened. What could have made someone so obsessed with music begin to hate it? My own thoughts are still a blur. I hope that writing everything down will help me to get the details into some sort of order.

Perfect order. It's something I love, something I crave. However, what happened to me does not fall into such a category; at least, not as long as I don't know what it was. It was magical, as incredible as that may sound. I can't think of any other word to describe it.

I feel that I am stalling, so I think that it would be best if I start the story. If I don't start now, I'm afraid I will keep writing like this and, a hundred pages later, finally realize the purpose of this book has not even begun to be fulfilled. I mustn't delay the inevitable.

I plan to kill myself after I write my last word.

1

I have always despised teaching.

My dream was to be a composer. This was a mere dream, however. I wrote frequently, going through page after page of sheet music, but I never produced anything of worth. I solved the universal problem of needing money to live by teaching private piano lessons to wastes of talent.

Being a well-known alumnus of Lakewood College, I was able to advertise there, the main form of the advertising being word of mouth. Because of that, enough students had come to me asking for lessons that I'd had to turn some down. Not only did I require a certain level of expertise, but also I would rather not have spent my entire day sitting through horrible renditions of the works of great composers such as

Chopin or Bach. Perhaps I sound vain or impatient, and that is the reason that I do not consider myself a good teacher.

However, occasionally I would have a student that impressed me enough to make the others bearable. In my five years of teaching, I had only encountered two such students. They had both recently graduated from college and moved out of state, leaving me depressed and longing for real talent.

My story begins in early September, and, as usual for that time of year, I would be receiving a few new students. The new ones were usually freshman music majors that had been recommended to me. The freshmen frustrated me. They almost always had inflated ideas of their own talent, and they thought they could coast through college as they had through high school. I was especially hard on them for that reason.

That day, however, I was expecting a senior named Annette Pauvére. She was a piano major who had previously taken lessons from a man that had been my instructor during college. I had talked to him on the phone about her earlier that week.

“She’s a wonderful girl,” Mr. Barry had said. “Excellent pianist. She reminds me of you at times.”

“Really?” I said, intrigued. “Why won’t you be teaching her anymore?”

“Her schedule and mine don’t agree this year,” he said. “She’s very busy in the mornings and afternoons with class and work, and the only times she has free for lessons are in the evening. I know you’re available at almost any time.”

“Is she a good listener? Quick learner?”

“She’s one of the best pupils I’ve had since you, Paul. She responds to instruction very well. Trust me—you will not regret teaching her.”

So, though I already had enough students for the semester, I accepted. I respected Mr. Barry, and I trusted his judgment of others. Annette intrigued me, because Mr. Barry did not praise just anyone. I was looking forward to our first lesson.

Our lessons were scheduled for Monday evenings from seven thirty to eight thirty. I was a little wary about the fact that she would be coming after a full day of class and work, but there was not another time that we could have them that she didn't work except Sundays, which was my day that I had set aside for solitude.

After eating a quick meal for dinner, I sat at the piano to wait for her. I had inherited the piano and my musical talent from my mother. Each time I sat down to play, I would see her sitting on the bench in my place, as I sat on a chair beside her, watching each precise move her long fingers made. Her dark hair would fall in front of her face as she pounded the keys passionately, but it did not deter her. She knew the music so intimately that she could play most pieces with her eyes closed, which is exactly what she did at times.

"Paul," she would say. "Tell me what you think about this passage. Do you think I should take my time in this measure to really emphasize what the composer is saying, or do you feel that makes it drag needlessly?"

She would play the measures, and I would listen intently. I would let her know my opinion, and she would take it to heart. She admired my natural talent, and I admired hers.

The day the cancer took her was the worst day of my life.

My apartment neighbors didn't seem to mind the piano. Some of them had even told me they enjoyed hearing the music. I was respectful of the time, and I never played past ten p.m., which also happened to be my self-appointed bedtime.

I played the first piece on my mind, which was a movement of a Beethoven sonata. I then played a couple pieces by Debussy before I stood and went to my window to wait. It was seven fifteen, so Annette would be there soon.

I could spend hours standing at my window, even though the view consisted mostly of a drab parking lot. To me, however, it was very soothing. Gazing at the trees surrounding the building and watching people interact with each other inspired me in some strange way. Songs

of the birds each morning had become portions of main themes in some of my compositions.

If only my pieces were good enough to publish, I could be truly alone. I longed to be able to cancel all of my lessons and just compose and play.

A small knock on my door reminded me that I had a while to wait until I could stop giving lessons. I went to answer it.

Looking back upon that moment, I see her almost as clearly as if I had taken a picture. She was beautiful. Her wide, innocent eyes stared up at me shyly as she clutched her piano books in her hands. Her hands—they were delicate, perfect hands with long, graceful fingers. I noticed them right away, and I longed to see them float across the keys of the piano.

"I wasn't sure what you wanted me to bring," she said, thinking I was looking at her music.

When I didn't answer right away, she added, "I brought some pieces I've wanted to learn. I also brought pieces I already know so you can hear how I play."

I nodded, still enraptured by her beauty. Her long, straight, dark brown hair spilled over her shoulders, framing her smooth face. Her large eyes especially held my attention. They were such a clear, sparkling blue. I gazed at her for a moment before she shyly looked down and away.

"Come in," I said, the trance interrupted now that I could no longer see her eyes.

She stepped inside, and I closed the door behind her. She looked around.

"You have a nice apartment," she told me, undoubtedly noticing the pristine condition in which I kept it.

"Thank you," I replied.

I led her to the piano, and she sat at the bench with her hands folded in her lap. She looked at me expectantly.

I sat in the chair next to the bench.

“What do you have to play for me?” I said, bypassing small talk. I was eager to hear her, and, if she wasn’t any good, I didn’t want to waste time asking meaningless questions when I knew I wouldn’t care about the answers.

She immediately opened a book of Chopin nocturnes and placed it on the piano. The page was open to one of my favorites. I was impressed by her taste, but I knew that if she played it any worse than I felt the piece deserved to be played, I would not be pleased.

Perhaps my expectations were too high.

As nervous as Annette seemed to be, it did not show in her playing. She played as if the piano were a part of her. The notes rang in the air more beautifully than most could have made them. It wasn’t perfect, but it approached perfection in such a way that I knew I would have a wonderful time teaching her.

The piece ended, and I gave her a solemn nod of approval. As a rule, I tried not to let my students believe they’d done too well, or they would not see the need for improvement. I believe Annette knew how well she had played, anyway, since I could see it in her smile.

“What else do you have?” I asked.

I had her play a couple more pieces. Each style was different, but each piece was played with amazing dexterity. Even when she made a mistake occasionally, she was able to recover from it well. I found myself falling in love with her with each note that she played. I felt that whatever personality she may have had didn’t matter—I could marry her merely based on her ability to interpret my favorite composers so wonderfully.

When she was done and had played over a half hour worth of music, I sat and looked at her, strongly resisting the urge to kiss her. I wanted at least to take those beautiful hands and caress them.

She broke the silence, which was almost becoming awkward.

“I’ve never had such a young teacher,” she said. “Mr. Barry made me think you were a seasoned veteran, and you’re only twenty-seven.”

“Well, I was born with the gift of music,” I told her. “My talent, however, comes from the countless hours I have spent developing it, not just from my inborn ability.”

“You write music, too, I hear.”

“I do. So far, I haven’t written anything that I’m especially proud of, however.”

“I’m sure it’s great.”

“I’ve been told that,” I said with a nod. “But I don’t like to settle for what I consider to be inferior work. So I don’t say that I’m proud of it.”

“But, if you consider your music to be inferior, and you don’t settle for what you consider to be inferior, then why do you sell your music to school bands and orchestras?”

“That’s a simple answer,” I said. “I need the money.”

“Why don’t you perform instead? You could easily become successful with the connections at Lakewood.”

“I don’t like performing for others,” I told her. “I would much rather sit here at home and write music. I’d like to sit down and listen to others interpreting my music more than I would like to interpret others’ music for the enjoyment of an audience.”

“I understand,” she said.

She wasn’t aware of how privileged she was to be able to ask me so many questions. I did not feign amiability with my students, and I greatly discouraged conversation. However, Annette’s voice was so beautiful that I could not deny her. I wondered if she was also a vocalist, because her tone was so light, so clear, so *cantabile*.

I was surprised at my feelings for someone whom I didn’t even know. I had never bothered to fall in love with anyone before, for almost the same reason that I had never bothered to develop true friendships. The very idea of being in love was almost frightening to me. How would it affect my music? I had always assumed it would be detrimental, for I would spend too much time with the object of my affection. Now I realized that, were I in love with the right person, it might provide inspiration, if nothing else.

However, a teacher/student relationship could never do. If I were to love her, would I still reprimand her? How would she respond? I decided that I must not let her know how I felt. It was only best.

In fact, I was best for me to attempt to ignore my feelings for her and view her simply as my student.

“Let’s get back to the lesson,” I said, forcing myself to look away from her and to focus instead on the music sitting on the piano. “There is a piece by Brahms that I would like for you to learn.”

I stood and went to my bookcase filled with music. How much money had I spent over the years on those masterpieces? I would assume that I own every major piano work and many minor works by every major composer. To me, each piece is a memory. They remind me of the times and circumstances surrounding the practicing and the performances. As I searched for the Brahms, my hand brushed over a Beethoven sonata that I had played for my family one holiday ten years ago. It was the last piece my mother had ever heard me play. I paused at the book, and memories of her again filled my thoughts while time seemed to slow down to let me remember her.

My father had given me a standing ovation that day.

“Wow!” he’d said, looking down at my mother, who was still sitting, yet looking very, very pleased. “Claudia, I think he’s better than you.”

“Oh, stop, Peter,” she’d replied with a weak grin, tapping him lightly with the back of her hand. She’d turned to me. “Paul, you should play that in your senior recital.”

Her beautiful hair was gone by then.

“If you can’t find it, I can buy a copy,” Annette said, interrupting my thoughts. My back was to her, and she could not see the pain etched across my face.

I escaped my nostalgic trance and continued my search.

“It should be here somewhere,” I said. I found the piece and pulled it from between the others. I presented it to Annette.

“‘Intermezzo in A,’” she read. “‘Opus 118, number two.’ I think I’ve heard this.”

“It’s a comparatively simple piece,” I told her. “We’ll start light.”

She nodded.

“It’s eight thirty,” I told her.

She looked at the clock on top of the piano. “Time went so quickly,” she commented.

“I expect you to practice at least an hour a day. That is the minimum, however. Two or three hours each day is what I prefer.”

“I try to practice as often as I have time,” she told me. “Usually it varies.”

“Just make sure you’ve made significant progress each time you come to me for your lesson.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said.

I almost made the grave mistake of telling her to call me Paul. But I kept silent, because I never let my students call me by my first name, and I knew she shouldn’t be an exception. For her to call me “Sir” meant that she respected me.

Besides, she was just a student of mine. There wasn’t anything special about her.

Oh, but I could tell myself that all day and never quite believe it. There *was* something special about her, but I couldn’t figure out exactly what it was. Was it her beauty? Her skill? She seemed to have a radiance about her that surpassed her natural beauty. Something inside her attracted me to her, even though I didn’t even know her yet. Whatever it was, it was frustrating me.

When she left, I went to my window again. I could not see her go to her car since it was on the other side of the building, but I was able to see her drive away. At least, I assumed it was she.

She filled my thoughts for the remainder of the day. As much as I tried to remove her from my mind, she stubbornly refused to leave it. The pieces she had played were the background music for the images of her that lingered there. I closed my eyes for a moment and just stared at the picture of her in my mind.

I opened them and scolded myself. I had never thought about a woman in such a way before in my life. Could I be any more irrational than to have such feelings for someone whom I didn't even know? When I wrote music, I tended to follow rules of theory precisely at the expense of writing from the heart. As much as it frustrated me that my music lacked creativity, I could never let myself write anything that broke the rules. Therefore, since I didn't allow myself to write spontaneously, why would I have allowed the same for love? Why would I meet a woman and immediately love her without rational explanation?

In an attempt to stop thinking about Annette, I looked down at the almost-finished composition on my desk. I read the notes in my head as if I were reading words in a book. Each measure aggravated me so much that by the end of the first page, I was too upset to continue. I didn't like it. I needed to finish it so that I could try to make money from it, but I wanted to burn it.

Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to be something other than a musician. Though I could have also considered a career in acting or writing novels, I would have the same problems with those fields. People with skills related to the arts usually seem to have slow beginnings. It is a curse, but those who persevere are generally rewarded. However, it's hard not to wonder if success will ever come for them.

I doubted *my* success would come because of the current composition, yet I turned to the page where I had stopped writing. I was in desperate need of inspiration, so I thought of Annette. That seemed to work, because notes began to come to me. I erased whole measures many times, but eventually, I finished the page. I had been writing for five hours. There was just the ending left to write, which I predicted would be a page in length.

I stood and turned off my desk lamp. As I walked across the living room toward my bedroom to retire for the night, my eyes went to the piano bench where she had sat.

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I quickly looked away, already having been somewhat embarrassed by the fact that I had used her as fuel for my composition. She was just my student, I reminded myself.

Each time from that point on that I started to think of her, I scolded myself and tried to imagine what her faults could be so that I would perhaps stop seeing her as such a perfect, angelic figure. It seemed to work at least temporarily.

I could not let myself fall in love. Love was very inconvenient and often irrational.

2

The rest of the week was filled with inferior students and vain attempts at turning my composition into a masterpiece. Students that used to please me at least a little bit were beginning to give me a headache. I found myself comparing them to Annette.

One of my students was an intermediate violinist. His older brother had recommended me to him after remembering that I also play the violin in my spare time. I had benevolently accepted the offer to teach him, but I'd doubted that I would allow any more than one violin student at a time. Mistakes on the violin are far worse than mistakes on a piano. My sanity could only take so much.

That day, after having heard Annette last Monday, I was especially impatient with the student, whose name was Ben.

"No!" I interrupted him. "Can't you tell that's off pitch?"

Ben played the note again, his finger never having moved. “It is?” he said.

“Yes!” I told him, as I forcefully played a high D on the piano. “Don’t you hear that?”

“I . . . I can’t hear it,” he said.

“Move your finger up a little higher,” I told him.

He moved his finger slightly.

“There!” I said. “Do you hear that? Listen to the way the D string vibrates in response. There is an obvious difference that you hear when you are perfectly on pitch. Remember that sound. How can you be a good violinist if you can’t tell when you’re not on pitch?”

I reprimanded him for many things that day, constantly interrupting him as he played:

“Less vibrato there. It sounds too nervous.”

“Pay better attention to your phrasing.”

“*Pianissimo*, not *piano*!”

“You’re flat.”

“You’re sharp.”

“Don’t play the open string there.”

“Are you blind? Do you not see that slur?”

“Where’s the feeling? You’re boring me!”

Everything I told him was something that should be told, anyway, but I told him as if he were the most horrible violinist in the world. I cringed noticeably every time he squeaked or didn’t hit a pitch perfectly. I frowned at the end of both pieces he had prepared for me.

“I’m sorry,” he said at the end of our lesson. “I’ll practice more this week.”

“Yes, you will,” I told him with an exasperated sigh. “Practice all of your scales. Three octaves. Do them slowly, and make sure every note is on pitch.”

I suppose I have failed to mention I was born with perfect pitch. I can tell when someone is flat or sharp immediately. I can hear any note and say what note it is. I can also hum or whistle any note given to me,

and hit it perfectly without having heard it played. It is an ability that very few have. Even when one is born with the talent, it requires nurturing to bring it to a point at which it is truly useful. Thankfully, my mother recognized my talent early, though not as early as I would have liked. Still, she was very adamant about my working hard to ensure that such a unique gift was never wasted.

I escorted Ben to the door. I closed and locked it behind him, thankful that he was my last lesson of the day.

It was Thursday. Monday could not come quickly enough.

On Friday, I went to the college. The orchestra would have a concert that night, and they needed a conductor, because theirs had become ill. I was one of the people the college would call at moments such as those, having excelled in all of my conducting courses. I was very grateful for the opportunity, because I would be paid.

My rent had been due for a week, and my landlord was hard to avoid.

There was a girl in the orchestra named Megan that had a crush on me that she made no attempt to hide. She was a junior clarinetist, and she could be quite obnoxious. If it weren't for her, I would not mind conducting the orchestra. Without fail, she would come up to me after rehearsal and make small talk with me, touching my arm lightly or brushing her body against me as she'd lean forward to point out a passage of music. It sickened me. I let it happen for the same reason I let other social situations happen — I never knew what might become of it that could benefit me in the future.

Megan was especially hard to deal with. She was very bubbly and outgoing. It seemed as if she were always smiling, which made her appear vapid to me. In my experience, people who smiled too much were just blissfully ignorant. But the occasional, genuine smile on a person who only did so when there was reason was a wonderful sight.

I knew the orchestra hated guest conductors, especially right before a performance. My style would be different from that of the original conductor, and I would neglect to cue certain parts that they were used to having cued for them. Well, they should have been familiar enough with their parts not to need any more than a steady beat.

Fortunately, one of the selections was a piece of which I was very fond. I conducted with a passion that spread to the group.

“Bravo,” I heard when the piece ended, accompanied by a single applause.

I turned and saw Dr. Peligrin, the director of the music department.

“Doctor,” I acknowledged with a smile and a small nod. He walked up to me and I shook his hand. “How long were you standing there?”

“Long enough,” he said. “Excellent job, Paul. They will do well.”

“I think Paul should replace Mr. Hart,” Megan spoke up.

Dr. Peligrin laughed. “I should tell him you said that,” he said. “I’m sure he wouldn’t appreciate it. You could kiss first chair goodbye.”

The ensemble chuckled at that.

“Besides,” Dr. Peligrin continued, “Paul here refuses any offer I make to him for a regular position at anything.”

It was true. As much as I seemed always to be short on money, I would never accept a teaching position. Teaching piano lessons was bad enough, but to teach whole groups of students at once would be unbearable. The only thing I would be able to stand as a last resort would be to conduct some sort of ensemble, but only if I could hold auditions. It was for that reason that I allowed myself to be on the list of substitutes that the college could call.

Dr. Peligrin gave me a couple pats on my back. “Keep up the good work,” he said as he walked away.

An hour later, the practice ended. I gathered my things and began my journey down the halls of the music building.

It was on the stairs that I saw her.

I had almost forgotten that she went to Lakewood, and the surprise nearly made me lose my balance. I quickly held on to the railing.

“Hi,” she said with a shy smile.

I smiled at her. She was beauty defined.

“Annette,” I greeted. Even her name was beautiful to me.

“I really love the Intermezzo,” she told me. “I’ve been working hard on it, and I hope to have it at least almost ready by Monday.”

“Good,” I told her. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

She walked past me, and I melted inside. I felt weak. Her beauty had seemed to illuminate the entire stairwell. How could I let a woman make me feel this way?

I regained my composure and continued down the stairs to the exit on the first floor.

It was all I could do not to take the pages of my composition and rip them into pieces smaller than the eye could see. I was angry with myself for letting such worthless melodies and chord progressions escape my fingers. I was certain that Mozart did not write such filth when he was starting out. Of course, Mozart was a genius who wrote music at the age of five. I should not have compared myself to someone such as him.

Yet, even comparing myself to myself, I felt the piece was still not worthy to be played by anybody. I was hard on myself, I knew. I was aware that, were I to present the piece to Dr. Peligrin, he would be amazed and praise it as he usually does. Lakewood and occasionally other nearby school usually bought my music. Sometimes they would be played at concerts. That wasn’t enough for me, however. Not only did I not get much money for it, but I also wanted my music to be heard and played around the world.

“Never settle for the inferior, Paul,” my mother would always tell me. “There are a lot of people out there who don’t know a thing about music. To these people, everything you produce, every sound your fingers create is gold. But they don’t know anything about gold. They don’t have the expertise to look at gold and tell what its worth is. They

just see it shine. You have that expertise, Paul. You are able to judge perfection. Don't settle for less."

Don't settle for less, I repeated to myself, looking down at the jumble of notes. Oh, yes, it would shine for Dr. Peligrin. It would be yet another piece to make people smile and pat me on the back, telling me how good I was at writing music. But it was filth. I knew that. My mother would have known that. She would have been disappointed to know that I was settling just so that I could have a small trickle more of an income to keep my landlord happy.

But for now, I had to push that out of my mind. The clock's hands moved into position. It was six thirty. I turned off my desk lamp and the overhead light and left my apartment.

The auditorium was filling quickly by the time I arrived. The orchestra was in another room warming up. I had been told that I didn't have to be there early, so I stood off to myself near the doors and watched the people, which was one of my favorite activities. Although I can interact with people very well, I'd much rather stand aside and watch them interacting with each other.

I was also searching through the crowd for Annette, hoping she would be there. Did she usually come to concerts such as those?

I looked away from the crowd and at a blank spot on the wall. Never before had I gone somewhere hoping another person would be there. How dare she do such a thing to me! I forced myself to concentrate on music.

Something made me turn to look at the audience again. To my sheer joy, I saw her! She had just walked in through the doors on the other side of the room, and she was walking down the aisle to find a seat.

Suddenly, she seemed to be the only person in the room. I watched her as she sat in the center of the fifth row. When she was settled, she looked up, and our eyes met. She blushed and looked away, then looked

back. She smiled and lifted her hand in a small, tentative wave. I smiled back at her.

The wind ensemble did very well. All throughout the performance, my mind was on Annette, but, thankfully, it seemed to help me rather than to hinder. Afterwards, I received many congratulations. I painted a smile on my face as professors talked briefly with me, telling me how much passion they could see that I had as I conducted.

“You seemed to be one with the music,” one told me. “I miss having you in my classes, Paul.”

“Yes, and I miss your classes,” I told him. “You really taught me a lot.”

People liked me. I knew how to smile and what to say to get them to enjoy my company. They didn’t seem to realize how much I abhorred some of them. That professor was one excellent example of such a person. He was the type of man that seemed to consider himself a musical genius when he was really quite the opposite.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said. “How are the compositions coming along?”

I had almost forgotten that I had brought along my latest work to show Dr. Peligrin. After I finished talking, I quickly left the room to go to my car.

“Good job,” I heard a vaguely familiar voice say.

I stopped and turned. Standing against a wall outside the doors to the auditorium was Annette. Had she been waiting for me?

“Thank you,” I said, moving closer to where she was.

“You conduct so well that I know you must be an great musician,” she told me. “I want to hear you play.”

“Maybe one day, but I hardly ever perform anymore.”

“You could play for me after one of my lessons.”

“I don’t usually play for my students,” I told her. Was I willing to make an exception, however?

“Oh,” she said. I was thankful that she did not ask for a reason.

I would have loved to talk to her more, but I needed to get the composition from my car before Dr. Peligrin left.

“I should be going,” I told her. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Bye,” she said.

My steps were light all the way to my car. As annoying and inconvenient as love seemed to be, it gave me a very nice feeling. I found myself unable to wait until Monday when I would see her again.

I retrieved the music from my car and went back inside the building. As I walked down the hallway to the auditorium, I looked around for Annette, but she was nowhere in sight.

I found Dr. Peligrin inside the auditorium conversing with a parent. I waited patiently nearby until he was finished.

“Dr. Peligrin,” I said, walking up to him after the parent had walked away.

“Paul,” he said cheerfully, turning to face me. “Good job tonight. It’s amazing that you only saw the music today and you were still able to conduct it all so well.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I said. “I’ve composed another piece. I’m considering trying to publish this one. I would like for you to look over it, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I’d be delighted,” he said. “Did you want me to do this now, or can I get back to you tomorrow sometime?”

“It’s up to you.”

“Is this a copy?” he asked, gesturing toward the music in my hand.

“Actually, no,” I said, glancing down at it. “But you may keep it overnight if you’d like.”

“Let’s go to the office and get a copy of it,” Dr. Peligrin. “We’ll get a couple in fact. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to the original.”

I followed him to the office, which was dark and locked. He opened it and used the copier to make two copies of my music for me. I thanked him, and we said our goodbyes.

I went to my car, but I did not see Annette on the way. I also didn't see any cars in the parking lot that resembled the one I had seen driving away from my apartment building that last Monday.

I reminded myself that I seemed to be becoming obsessed with a woman I didn't even know. Therefore, I forced her out of my mind. I was confusing myself—sometimes I could not stop thinking about her, and sometimes I scolded myself for the very idea of love. At that moment, I was doing the latter. I told myself that I should focus on things in life that were more important. I had lived twenty-seven years without being so enamored with a woman. I would not let Annette possess my heart in such a way.

I had an appointment at nine o'clock Monday morning. I had to wait for about forty-five minutes. I passed the time by staring at the paintings decorating the walls, wondering if they had been chosen because of their magnificence or because they matched the room. I assumed it must have been the latter, because they certainly weren't magnificent. I am not qualified to judge the value of visual art, but I would not have even accepted the paintings on the wall as a gift. It amazed me that the person who had selected them did not appear to possess even the most elementary eye for aesthetics.

I shifted my attention from the art to the people in the room with me. There was only one other person who seemed to be waiting, plus the secretary, who was busy at her computer. The person was sitting quietly a couple chairs from the door. She was a woman who was no younger than sixty or seventy years of age, and she appeared to be staring at me. It was making me uncomfortable. Her old, ragged clothes didn't match, and her gray hair was a mess. She was filthy. As I sat in the room waiting with her, time seemed to crawl to a stop and die from her overwhelming stench.

Finally, the office door opened.

“Mr. Stewart,” said the man at the door.

“Hello, Dr. Henderson,” I greeted.

“Please come in.”

I followed him into his office, which appeared less like an office and more like a sitting room for the sake of his patients. The colors were soft, and there were no sharp corners anywhere that I could see. I assumed it made the room appear non-threatening.

My weekly therapist appointments were a pain. I had begun to see him by recommendation of my father after I had complained to him about my music’s never being good enough to publish. He had insisted that I go to see if there was anything that could be done to stimulate my creative energy. Of course, I initially declined, but my father offered to pay, and obligation compelled me to accept. I felt that the appointments were so far meaningless. My creativity had not changed, and I had become increasingly annoyed by the manner in which the visits were conducted.

“So, Paul,” Dr. Henderson said as we sat. He placed his hands on his crossed knee and cocked his head, a gesture that always irked me about him. “How is the composing coming?”

“It’s going well,” I answered. “I’ve completed another score.”

“Excellent! How do you feel about it?”

“I despise it.”

“Why is that?” he asked.

Every appointment went the same way, with the same questions asked. It was tedious.

“I feel that something is lacking. I feel that I am not composing to my full potential, and that I cannot emulate the talent of the greats.”

“So you still feel that you need to be not good, but great.”

“I do not think one should settle for ‘good.’”

“Has anyone else seen or heard this newest composition?” He was now settling back in his chair. I was still sitting with perfect posture as I usually did.

“Dr. Peligrin. He loves it, as usual. But he loves everything I do. It causes me to question his judgment.”

“Mmm.”

I cringed inwardly but kept my face pleasant. I made a mental note to tell my father that I did not know how much longer I can stand these appointments.

“Do you feel that the ‘greats’ loved everything they produced?” Dr. Henderson asked me.

I thought for a moment. “No,” I said. “Sometimes they were commissioned to produce certain works. I cannot imagine that this was never tedious.”

“Then why do y—“

“I am not *forced* to compose. I do sell my work to be performed, but I will not attempt to publish until it is perfect. In the meantime, I will continue to make money from piano lessons.”

He paused to take notes in silence.

“Let’s discuss other things for a moment,” he said, looking up at me again. “How is your life these days? Are the piano lessons going well?”

“Yes, they are,” I said.

“Any new students for the new school year?”

“Quite a few.”

“Any with potential?”

I paused slightly. He noticed. “Yes, one.”

“Ah. Tell me more about this student.”

I did not want to defile Annette by attempting to describe her to this man who was only using her to get inside my head. I tried to think of what I could say to appease him without admitting my affection and creating an entirely new direction for him to take our sessions.

“She is . . . very talented. She gives me hope.”

The doctor did not respond. He simply sat there, waiting for me to lose myself in an audible reverie prompted by his silence and my need to fill the quiet with my thoughts. Ah, but what he did not understand about me (or perhaps he did and was simply hoping to push past such an

obstacle) was that I was content to let the silence linger as I reflected upon her beauty in the inner solitude of my mind.

I recalled the image of her standing in my doorway with her thick, dark hair, wearing her crisply ironed clothes from work. I replayed her intimate knowledge of Chopin performed by her long, delicate fingers caressing the keys of the piano as they had for years, exploring them expertly. I imagined my own fingers lightly tickling her ivory skin.

Dr. Henderson was watching me. He finally stopped and began to write in his notepad. My impatience grew at that moment, and I forced the images of Annette out of my mind.

“Could we get on to business?” I asked him, looking at the clock on his wall. Our session would soon come to an end. I had been thinking about Annette for much longer than I’d thought. “This is my fourth meeting with you, and you have yet to help me with the problem for which I’ve initially come to you.”

“Mmm,” he replied. “Yes. The matter of your reluctance to publish.”

“No,” I spoke sharply. “The matter of my inability to produce work worthy of being published. I know that I have the talent to do so. I must know what is blocking me from creating accordingly.”

“Paul,” he said, closing his notepad. “I want you to go home today, and I want you to review the score you just finished. I want you to write down exactly what you don’t like about it. Then bring both to me next time you come, and we will try to figure out what can be done.”

“Do you expect to give me musical advice?”

“I can’t do that. I don’t know anything about music. I can, however, help you give yourself musical advice.”

This was a waste of time. Did he think I did not already do those things? I wondered how many more chances I would give him before telling my father to keep his money.

“Yes, fine,” I said dismissively. I stood. There were still ten minutes left in my session, but I did not feel there was any more to be accomplished. “I will be leaving.”

“Will you see her before we meet again?”

I paused. I had been on my way out, and my back was turned to him. I stood still as her image clouded my vision. Her books clutched against her chest. Her shy smile. I closed my eyes so that I could see her more clearly.

“Yes,” I said softly. “Yes, I will see her tonight.”

“Good,” said Dr. Henderson. “I think some semblance of a love life would do you well.”

The secretary was no longer at her desk. I assumed she must have gone to the bathroom. The woman was still there, however.

With a sigh, I made my way to the door. I could feel her wide eyes on me, as if she were peering straight past my flesh and into my core. I put my hand on the doorknob, about to turn it and open the door.

Suddenly the woman grabbed my left hand and held on to it tightly. I jumped, startled, and looked at her. She was still sitting, but now she was in the chair that was right beside the door. I hadn't seen her move to it. She looked up at me with those wide, crazed eyes, clasp my hand tighter and tighter each second.

She reached and grabbed my right hand before I had a chance to react. She held both with a surprisingly strong grip. I was too shocked to even try to pull away.

I looked around, but we were the only people in the room.

“What are you doing?” I hissed at the woman.

She said nothing, but she did not let go of my hands. They were beginning to tingle strangely, which I assumed at the time was because she was holding them so tightly. I tried to pull away, but her hold was firm.

“Let go of me!” I cried.

Finally, after what had seemed to be an eternity to me, she let go of my hands just as suddenly as she had grabbed them.

I left immediately.

Rebekah Blackmon

Even now, as I write these events down and remember them, I am still unsure of exactly what the woman was doing when she'd held my hands in such a manner. However, now that I remember that moment, I find myself wondering if she was what began it all.

3

I went back to my apartment and threw the pages of my composition away in the wastebasket beside my desk. I knew Dr. Peligrin still had copies, but I personally never wanted to see it again.

Looking at the clock, I noted that I had half an hour until my first lesson of the day. I decided to spend the time practicing the piano. I sat at the bench of the piano, but, before I placed my hands on the keys, I decided to call Dr. Peligrin. I wanted to tell him that I would not be publishing my latest work.

“It was good, Paul,” Dr. Peligrin told me on the phone.

“It was boring,” I corrected.

“I wouldn’t use that word. I know how you like to write. I overlook the lack of creativity, because I assume you know about it, but you don’t care. Was I wrong in my assumption?”

“You are correct,” I told him, “but if there is something I could have changed, I would have preferred that you let me know.”

“Ah, but, would you have changed it?”

“Good point,” I said, looking down at the copy in the wastebasket.

“You’re obsessed with rules at the expense of anything else, Paul. There is nothing wrong with that. Your music is very well done.”

“It’s not that I *want* to follow them at the expense of creativity. It’s that I *can’t* make my writing perfect while at the same time making it sound great.”

“I can understand that.”

“I can’t win. I want to write perfect music, but I can’t seem to merge both elements of perfection.”

“I know that that frustrates you. Maybe you should practice creative writing and gradually blend in the rules.”

“I can’t purposely ignore rules.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. Have you reconsidered your desired career? With talent like yours, you should focus on performing.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I love to write. I can perfect a piece for as long as I want, and nobody has to see or hear it until it’s finished. When I perform, there is always a chance that I will make a mistake.”

“Paul, I can count the number of mistakes I have heard in your performances on one hand,” Dr. Peligrin told me. “You’re an excellent composer, but I think that you are a much better performer.”

“I have nowhere to play.”

“You haven’t tried hard enough. I could give you a few phone numbers. You should also consider auditioning for the pianist of the Westellers Symphony Orchestra, or maybe even as a violinist.”

“I’m not sure that I would enjoy that,” I said.

“Why not?”

I wanted to tell him it was because I would much rather sit in my apartment by myself and write, not practice with so many inferior musicians united to produce a local orchestra that did not even begin to compare to the Chicago or London Symphony Orchestra.

“It just doesn’t appeal to me.”

“You can be so difficult at times, Paul. You’re so talented, but you turn down so many opportunities because you don’t think they’re good enough. Instead, you would rather teach others until your works are published. But you let years and years go by without attempting to publish a single piece.”

I was aware that it didn’t seem to make sense, also. After all, Dr. Peligrin and I both knew that I did not enjoy teaching. What he didn’t realize was that, when I taught, I could take the filth I heard and turn it into gold. If I were to play with an orchestra, I would not be able to instruct them. In fact, I would have to succumb to the instructions of another.

As for never attempting to publish, I did not want to waste my time with music that I knew would be rejected. And, if for some reason it was not rejected, I did not want my name associated so broadly with inferior work permanently printed and reproduced. I could not let imperfection be carved in stone.

“One day I’ll be successful,” I said.

“I know,” said Dr. Peligrin. “I just hope that, for your sake, that day comes soon.”

“Well, I should be going. Thank you very much for your time.”

“Any time, Paul. I’ll show your piece to Professor Rochester tomorrow. I’ll let you know if he decides to use it.”

“Thank you.” We said goodbye and hung up the phone.

My twelve o’clock student knocked on my door ten minutes later. I opened the door and greeted her with an expression that made it obvious that I wasn’t looking forward to the lesson.

I finally sat down at the piano at one o’clock after she had left. I would have an hour to practice until another student came. I looked down at the keys, deciding what I wanted to play. After a little thought, I chose

to warm up with a piece I had memorized by Bach. I placed my fingers on the keys and put myself in the correct mood.

I began to play, focusing on the music as if only it existed in the entire world.

I played it . . . perfectly.

I smiled when I was done, pleased with my performance. It wasn't very often that I played a piece without mistakes. When it happened, it gave me a feeling of bliss that I have yet to feel concerning anything else.

I reached for the Chopin scherzo on which I was working, sad at the thought that my perfection would be no more once I begin playing it. I sat there in silence for a moment, basking in the joy I had received from the Bach.

Finally, with a sigh, I began to play the scherzo.

To my amazement, every note, every dynamic marking, all phrasing, each tempo change, even added rubato—everything was *perfect*. I stared at the music, then at my hands in disbelief when I was finished. Parts on which I had tediously practiced for days had flowed from my fingers as perfectly and as naturally as breath from my body.

I could not possibly practice any more. I was too happy to want to do anything to ruin that happiness.

I stood and went to my window. I wished I had recorded myself as I played those two pieces, but I hadn't. It didn't matter. I didn't need a recording to remind myself of what I'd done or to prove to others that I could do it.

Suddenly a thought occurred to me. If I were doing so well, would I . . . could I maybe play . . . ?

I walked to my bookshelf. I looked for the "G" section and reached for the Godowsky piece that I had been trying to learn off and on for the past five years. No matter how hard I worked on it, I could never play it stylistically and technically perfectly. I had certainly impressed Mr. Barry with my efforts as I'd spent the entire summer after my senior year working on it, but I'd never impressed myself. After spending hours a day

for months on the piece, I'd finally temporarily ignored my intense need for perfection and set it aside to work on other pieces.

I pulled it out and looked at it. It was Godowsky's Passacaglia. The piece was so difficult that Vladimir Horowitz had once abandoned the study of the piece, insisting it required six hands to play. The challenge had intrigued me, and I was determined to learn a piece that Horowitz could not play. However, it had defeated me.

I set it on the piano and sat on the bench. I prepared myself and began to play.

As much as I tried to focus on the music itself and not on my playing, I couldn't help but to notice that I was playing even that piece without mistakes! There were no missed notes, and no notes played accidentally. I could feel the muscles in my arms working furiously as I played. My fingers ran up and down the keys at amazing speeds, and my eyes could not even keep up with them. Yet, each note was precisely hit.

I was playing it perfectly.

When the piece was over, I jumped up from the piano and let out a loud whooping noise. I started to laugh almost hysterically. If anybody could have seen me, he would have thought I had gone mad. I fell to the floor and lay there, staring up at the ceiling with a smile on my face that felt as if it would never leave.

Everybody has good and bad days, and that was certainly my good day. In fact, I felt that it was my *perfect* day. The rejection from that morning was long forgotten. I wanted to play every single piece of music I owned, but at the same time, I didn't want to make even one mistake on anything. To do so would bring me crashing back to the ground, colliding once again with harsh reality.

I decided not to play anymore. I wanted my good feeling to last the entire day. After all, it was Monday, and Annette would be coming that evening. I wondered if there existed a limit to the amount of happiness a person could enjoy.

After my two o'clock lesson was over, I spent most of the rest of the time until Annette's lesson running errands and cleaning my apartment.

Though everything was probably already clean enough by anyone else's standards, it was never clean enough for mine. Besides, I wanted Annette to be impressed by my apartment again.

Maybe I could also impress her by playing the Godowsky piece for her. After all, she did want to hear me play. I decided that that was what I would do.

I finished cleaning with time to spare, so I spent that time reading. Reading was something else I enjoyed, but I never seemed to have time to do it because of lessons, practicing, and composing. I settled comfortably in my armchair (donated to me by my father, who always complained about a lack of furniture in my apartment) and lost myself in the book.

From seven fifteen to seven twenty-five, my eyes probably looked up from my book fifty times to see what time it was. I didn't get much reading done in that time slot, because I would read a paragraph, look at the clock, and then look eagerly at my door, as if watching it would generate the knocking sound I longed to hear.

Finally, at seven twenty-five, I heard the knock, and my heart beat in time with it.

I placed my bookmark inside the book and returned it to my small bookcase reserved for novels. Resisting the urge to run, I walked to the door and opened it.

"Hi," said Annette with the shy smile that I loved so much. Her eyes gazed up at me as she clutched the Brahms book in her arms. She was dressed neatly, with gray slacks and a white blouse with sleeves that only covered her shoulders. She looked very nice, and I wondered if she dressed that way all the time, or if she had to because of work. I remembered the way she looked when I saw her at the college. She had been wearing jeans and a nice shirt at the time. I assumed her job required a professional appearance, but that she liked to look her best all

of the time, anyway. If that was true, it was only one more thing to add to the list of things I liked about her.

“Hello,” I said to her. “Come in.”

I let her inside and closed the door. She went immediately to the piano. I went to take my seat as she opened the book to the Intermezzo and placed it on the piano.

“How have you been?” I asked her, breaking my rule of conversation with my students.

“Not bad, I guess,” she said. “You?”

“Pretty good,” I told her. “I’m having a wonderful day today.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She smiled, and I could tell that she was genuinely happy to hear of my good day.

“Where do you work?” I asked her.

“Oh, at Sammy’s Bar and Grill on Maple Street,” she replied. “It’s not the best job. Well, not for me, anyway. I’m not cut out to be a server.”

“What do you plan to do as a career?”

“I’m not really sure. Music is a hard career to have, but I was thinking that I could try to become a concert pianist. If that doesn’t work, and it probably won’t, I might just teach piano lessons or music classes.”

“Being a piano teacher is a decent job to have while working on your dream,” I told her.

“Do you enjoy it?”

I paused. How could I tell a student of mine that I despised teaching?

“I enjoy seeing my students improve,” I told her.

“But you don’t enjoy teaching,” she said with a smile.

“That’s not fair. You were supposed to be satisfied with my answer.”

“It’s okay,” she laughed. It was such a perfect, smooth, and songlike laugh. “I saw right through it, because I would have answered the same way. You have to do what you have to do, though, I guess.”

“I’m sure I will enjoy teaching you,” I told her. “And I mean that. From what I’ve heard, I believe you will be an excellent student.”

“Well, thank you, Mr. Stewart,” she said.

“Call me Paul.” The words had left my mouth before I’d had a chance to realize it or to hold them back. Those were two rules that I had broken already. I had never been so friendly with a student of mine.

“Thank you, Paul,” she corrected.

“We should begin the lesson,” I said, although I didn’t want to stop talking to her. However, I reminded myself that hearing her play was just as good as hearing her voice. “How is the Intermezzo coming?”

“Pretty well, I think,” she said. “I’ve worked hard on it.”

“I’m glad to hear that. You may begin when you’re ready.” I sat back in my chair.

She began to play. I listened in amazement to the style she was able to add to the piece after only having played it for a week. I closed my eyes and let the beauty of the music surround me. It was such a soothing piece—so light and delicate, much like the fingers that played it.

I opened my eyes, because the image of Annette added to the effect of the music much more than the darkness of my closed eyelids. I watched the side profile of her face as she focused on the notes in front of her. She was stunning. My breath caught in my throat as I partook of her beauty. I longed to hold her in my arms.

I stood and began to pace the room, listening. There were, of course, a few mistakes, but certainly fewer than I’d expected after a week. She covered them very well, and they didn’t take much away from the overall flow of the piece.

I stood still a few feet away from her and looked at her. She didn’t seem nervous that I had been walking around or that I was no longer sitting next to her. Usually students were distracted whenever I moved, but Annette’s demeanor didn’t change at all.

I moved closer to her until I was less than a foot away. She was playing what I thought to be the climax of the piece at the end of the middle section. The beautiful melody floated over arpeggios as the piece rose in dynamic level, sweeping me away with it until I could hardly stand it anymore. The music was intoxicating me. I had to have her.

I gently put a hand on her shoulder. Her playing did not falter. I slowly ran my hand along her shoulder and her upper arm. Her skin was even smoother than I had expected it to be. My desire for her grew.

I placed my other hand on her other shoulder. With the first hand, I gently pulled her hair back, and I leaned over and lightly kissed her perfect neck. The sweet scent of her hair encompassed me.

Her playing began to slow as if she would stop soon.

“Keep playing,” I quickly muttered, afraid the spell would be broken if the music ended.

As the music returned to the correct tempo, I continued to kiss her neck, my lips touching softly and lingering for a moment each time. I could feel her pulse quickening. Because of the music and the beautiful woman creating it, everything felt surreal to me. I didn’t let the fact that I didn’t really know her enter my mind. I felt that I loved her.

The music ended. Annette slowly dropped her hands to her lap, but she didn’t say anything. She tilted her head to the side a little to give me better access to her neck. My hands traveled down her arms and to her hands—the very hands that could play so beautifully. She turned them over, and our fingers intertwined. We remained like that as the world stopped turning.

It was the perfect moment to highlight the perfect day.

Finally, I stood, and time began again.

“Amazing,” I told her, my voice betraying my awe.

She turned and looked back at me with a gorgeous smile. I smiled back at her, and I found my hand touching her lovely cheek.

“If only all my students were like you,” I said.

She blushed.

“You played the piece so well after only a week,” I remarked.

“I wanted to impress you,” she admitted.

“Well, you certainly did.”

I had nothing left to teach her, and I wouldn't have wanted to even if I had. I didn't want to do anything to ruin the moment we had just shared.

I selected a new piece for her to learn—Liszt's *Liebstraume* (was it my subconscious that chose a piece about love?)—and we sat and talked for about an hour. I asked her every question that came to my mind, curious to know as much about her as I could. The more I knew, the more I loved and admired her.

When she left, I stood at my window and gazed outside with a smile. Everything seemed to be so perfect. She obviously shared my feelings. Kissing her during the Intermezzo hadn't scared her away, which it certainly would have done for any other woman. She was five years younger than I was, but that didn't matter. In fact, she was so mature that I hardly noticed.

I turned off the lights in the living room and kitchen and went to my bedroom to prepare for bed. It was slightly earlier than I normally went to bed, but I wanted to end the day with Annette's visit. I also wanted to lie in bed and think about her, hoping that my thoughts would turn into a dream so that I could see her again.

I had three lessons in a row scheduled for Tuesdays. I was dreading the day. The students were good, but not especially good, and there was nothing for me to look forward to with them. Teaching them was drudgery.

The first was George Lument, who seemed not to have practiced much at all that week. I found myself repeating instructions that I had given him the week before. He was a vain student that lacked the talent to support his ego. I was not happy with him at all, and I tried my best to make that obvious.

The second was Nicolas Turner, and he came five minutes late. I frowned upon tardiness, even though I know it's not my own money being wasted. I gave him a stern look of disapproval, and he looked down at his shoes.

"Sorry," he said. "I lost track of time."

I went to my chair, and he followed, taking his seat at the piano bench. Nick had been a student of mine for a year, so he knew what to expect. He opened his music and began to play immediately.

I cringed at every wrong note. How I longed for Annette to take his place at that moment.

“No, no,” I finally interrupted. “You’re butchering the piece.”

“What am I doing wrong?” he asked.

I paused with a sigh. “It might be better if I actually played it for you.”

Nick looked at me in surprise. He’d never heard me play. After all, how embarrassing would it be for me to make a mistake while demonstrating how something should be done? It was always easier to tell them. However, I felt confident. After my perfect playing the previous day, I felt as if I could play anything and not make a mistake. I decided to take advantage of that confidence to play for my students. I’d intended to play for Annette, but with what had happened during our lesson, I had completely forgotten.

I played the entire piece for him. It had been a few years since I’d played it, but I was still able to play without any mistakes at all. Not only was it free of mistakes, but the style I added to it was quite possibly the best that it could be. I finished and turned to look at Nick, who had been standing behind me and to the side. He had an incredulous look on his face.

“That is how it is to be played,” I told him.

“That was awesome!” he exclaimed.

“Practice hard and you’ll be able to do that, too.” I felt as if I were a parent telling his child to eat all his vegetables.

“I could never be as good as you,” he told me.

“Not with that attitude, you won’t,” I said. “Now, sit down and start playing. I’ll stop you when I need to.”

It seemed as if I had to stop him every other measure.

It was a long hour, but it ended eventually, only to welcome a new hour in which another student would come to show me how much she liked to spit in the faces of the great composers.

Hilary Lampert was nothing like Annette. She was plain, and her hands were too small to reach comfortably any more than an octave. She was working on Debussy's "Clair de Lune," and she played it as if it were storming.

"No!" I told her. "Every note must be light. Use the unicorda to make it softer."

Though her hands were small, they were heavy, and it was very difficult to get her to be gentle and graceful when playing Debussy. However, my job as a teacher was to promote variety, as much as I would rather not at times.

"Pretend each key is an egg," I said.

She tried that, but she tried too hard. Half of the notes she attempted to play didn't sound at all. I buried my head in my hands.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't do it!"

"Okay," I said, mustering as much patience as I could. "Play as lightly as you can, but make sure you press each key all the way down."

She did what I told her to do, but she had to slow down considerably as she made sure each key was pressed far enough. I sighed.

"Why don't you work on that some more?" I said. "Let's go to the next piece."

After that lesson was over, I went straight to my armchair and collapsed into it. I rested my head back and stared at nothing in particular. I wished all of my students could be as talented and motivated as Annette was. I was convinced that some of them hardly practiced an hour a week, let alone a day.

All of a sudden, I felt a strange and overwhelming sensation. Music filled my head so much that I was beginning to get a headache. I frowned. What was happening? I could hear music in my head that I'd never heard before, and it was both very clear and very good.

Just as suddenly as the music had come to me, I had an urge to write it down. I jumped out of my chair and went to my desk. I took fresh sheets of staff paper out of my drawer and picked up my pencil. I began to write.

I had never written so furiously in my life. I wrote the notes that I heard in my head as quickly and as accurately as a professional writing a letter being dictated to them would write. I didn't even have to think about anything as I wrote. I just put the notes down on paper as I heard them. The more I wrote, the more the headache subsided.

Two hours and one change of pencil lead later, I finished the piece. I breathed a heavy sigh and looked at the pages before me. It was an orchestral piece, and it surpassed all others I had written by far. What I had heard in my head had sounded amazing, and what I saw on the paper looked as if it might be perfect.

I didn't know what to make of it all. First, I could play the piano without mistakes, and then, out of nowhere, an original composition came to my mind as clearly as if I had been actually listening to it. What had happened?

Tired from having written so frantically, I decided that I would take a nap. Before I went to my bedroom, I dialed the number of a publisher of classical and instrumental music and made an appointment. I wanted to find out if I could suddenly write as perfectly as I could play.