

Perfect Cadence

by

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Prologue

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 I arrange these words according to events that have truly happened and will haunt me for as long as I still have the ability to think.

I am hesitant to begin. I am not only embarrassed by my thoughts and actions of the past, but also there are parts that I would rather forget just as much as there are parts that I will love to remember. 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 suppose I should tell you a little about myself. I've always preferred to live alone. I once tried to have a roommate, but it was horrible. It wasn't that he was a terrible roommate, but I am the type of

person that craves solitude as often as possible. I've only found one exception to this, and that exception will soon be very evident to you.

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. However, I do greatly enjoy observing people.

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 it's not necessarily nice-looking, 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. The strokes of this very pencil have been guided by my hand since 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 certainly require its help.

I have found that the word "musician" is sufficient to describe me. Before a week ago, one would always have found me involved in some way with music. I was always listening to it, composing it, or performing it. Now, I detest it. I will have nothing more to do with it, and I would not so much mind if my eardrums were suddenly to burst and leave me deaf for the remainder of my life.

You are probably wondering what could have made someone so obsessed with music begin to hate it. I'm not quite able to pinpoint exactly how it began, but I hope that writing everything down will help me to get it 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.

Therefore, this is my story.

1

As much as I despised teaching, it was what I did. I had decided that, since I needed money to survive, I should acquire it doing something I enjoyed. Music has always been my life, so, naturally, I decided to do something concerning it. My dream occupation was to be a composer, but, of course, I could not make a decent living attempting to sell what few inferior pieces I created as a young man fresh out of a college. Therefore, I became a private lesson instructor for piano.

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 do I require a certain level of expertise, but also I would rather not spend 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 in need of someone with talent to keep me sane.

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.

That day, however, I was expecting a senior named Annette Pauvere. She was a piano major who had previously taken lessons from a man that, ironically, 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. “I don’t understand why you won’t 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 that you are 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. I was intrigued by Annette, 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 to her lesson after a full day of class and work, but there was not another

time that we could have it 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. My parents had given me the piano seven years ago. I was very grateful, because I no longer was forced to go to the school's music building to practice, although I still went on occasion since some of those pianos were better than mine was. It had been difficult to move the piano from their house and to bring it up the stairs to my apartment, but I had managed with the help of my father and a couple of college acquaintances. I refuse to call them friends, because I've never really had any real friends. I'm not bitter about that, for I prefer it that way. People aren't as important to me as they are to others. As long as I have music, I am content. Mozart and Schubert are among my best friends.

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 she would be there soon.

I could spend hours standing at my window, though I suppose the view was not that special. To me, however, it was very soothing. Gazing at nature and watching people interact with each other inspired me in some strange way. Songs of the birds in the trees each morning had become portions of main themes in some of my compositions.

If only I could compose music worthy of publishing, 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.

She must have thought I was looking at her music, for she shrugged and said, "I wasn't sure what you wanted me to bring."

When I didn't answer right away, she said, "You are Paul Stewart, right?" She glanced at the apartment number on my door.

I nodded, still enraptured by her beauty. Her long, straight, dark brown hair spilled over her shoulders, framing her smooth face. Her large, innocent eyes especially held my attention. They were such a clear blue, and they seemed to sparkle. 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.

"Thank you," I replied. "I like to keep it looking decent."

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, for 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 talked about you as if 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."

"He says you write music, too."

"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. Therefore, 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 did you have it published? And why do you sell your music to school bands and orchestras?"

"I had it self-published," I corrected. "I need the money."

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

“I’m not very fond of 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 chose not to mention my fear of making a mistake during a performance.

“I understand,” she said.

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

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? Therefore, I decided that I must not let her know how I felt. It was only best.

In fact, I decided 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. It was the last piece my mother had ever heard me play. I paused at the book, and memories of her filled my thoughts while time seemed to slow down to let me remember her.

“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.

“I have it,” I assured her. 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 really went by 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 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. Nevertheless, I needed to finish it so that I could try to publish it. I'd composed too much that I would let sit instead of publishing, because I tended to find my pieces unworthy and feared rejection. However, I knew that I needed to try, so I told myself that this most recent piece would be one that I would submit to a publishing company.

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 with talent who persevere are generally rewarded. However, it's hard not to wonder if success will ever come for them.

Though I doubted *my* success would come because of the current composition, 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.

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.

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, which I knew wasn't fair to them.

One of my students was an intermediate violinist. I had been recommended to him by his older brother, who had remembered 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.

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? Don’t you 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 tone 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.

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.

There was a girl in the orchestra named Megan that seemed to have a crush on me. She was a junior clarinetist, and she could be quite obnoxious. If it weren't for her, I would not mind conducting the orchestra. But knowing she would be there watching me the way she always did almost made me detest the task.

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, perhaps 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 did. Lakewood and occasionally other nearby schools usually bought my self-published 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.

Gartford Publishing was a company in my state that published classical music. Dr. Peligrin was friends with the president of the company, and he had mentioned to me numerous times that I could use that fact to my advantage. Rather than mail in my music and wait for a response, I could make an appointment and present the music directly to the man whose evaluation mattered most. I'd considered going there a couple of times with what I considered my best works, but had decided to first perfect them before publishing them.

They never reached perfection, so I instead self-published them through a company I had discovered online, but I barely received enough money from those to cover the cost of publishing them

I tried harder, working day and night, but I still wasn't able to produce anything that I felt was worthy of being published by Gartford. I doubted the latest piece would be the one. However, I knew it wouldn't hurt to try.

I had finished it that day between the orchestra rehearsal and the concert. I set it aside, intending to make the trip to the Gartford that Monday morning. Then I decided to take it with me to have Dr. Peligrin look over it and offer any suggestions.

When 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.

I was also searching through the crowd for Annette, hoping she would be there. Did she usually come to the college's music events?

I looked away from the crowd. 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. I blushed, ashamed to have been caught staring. 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. "The orchestra sounded better than I've ever heard them sound. I really miss having you in my classes, Paul."

"Yes, and I miss your classes," I told him. "You 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 excellent 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 must 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 going to try to publish this one. I’d 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 can 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.”

After he made copies, 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 took my composition to Gartford Publishing Company at nine o’clock Monday morning. It was an hour drive for me, and I spent it in silence, wondering if my piece would be accepted. Dr. Peligrin had

called me that Saturday telling me that he thought my music was excellent.

Regardless of what Dr. Peligrin said, I wasn't certain if it was good enough for Gartford's standards, which were actually probably lower than my own. I was strange when it came to standards—I was aware that my compositions were great and that I could play the piano very well (and the violin better than most), but that wasn't good enough to me. I wasn't satisfied until I had reached perfection. It was what I expected of my students, and it was what I expected of myself.

As you can probably tell, I frequently would become frustrated with many things in life.

I admit that I was nervous as I walked into the building, though the feeling was foreign to me. I could probably perform in front of thousands (although I never had) just as if I were by myself. I was nervous about my composition because I knew I would be rejected.

I had to wait for quite a while, even though I had made an appointment. I stared 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.

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 next to the door. She was a woman who was no younger than seventy years of age, and she appeared to be staring at me. It was making me uncomfortable. I wondered what she was doing there. She didn't look like anyone who would be trying to publish music. Her old, ragged clothes didn't match, and her gray hair was a mess.

I ignored her and asked myself why I had come. Did I really want to make an appointment, wait for an undetermined amount of time until I could hand Mr. Henderson my music, then wait for more time until he

was finished studying it, only to be told it wasn't good enough? I especially did not like the thought that Mr. Henderson had high expectations of me due to Dr. Peligrin's compliments. I didn't want to ruin Dr. Peligrin's credibility by presenting an inferior piece.

The old woman continued to stare. I wanted so badly to ask her to stop, but I remained silent. After a few minutes, I began to stare back at her. I felt as if I were in junior high school having a staring contest with someone. Which one of us would be the first to falter?

I could not compete with the woman. Her gaze was steady, and I looked away.

I looked down at my music, its imperfections sticking out as if they had been highlighted. Perhaps I should have rewritten it, although I had no idea how I could have made it any better. To change one note would be to mess up an entire line. It was not that easy to fix something I had already written. It would be easier for me just to write a new piece.

Mr. Henderson had still not come out. Maybe I could reschedule my appointment. I looked at the secretary's desk, but she was no longer there. She had probably just gone to the bathroom, but now I was too intent on leaving to wait for her and risk Mr. Henderson coming out first.

I quickly stood and made my way to the door. I debated telling the woman "good luck" just to see if I would get a response from her, even though I doubted she was there to publish anything. I decided against it. 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, making the music fall to the floor. I jumped, startled, and looked at her. She was still sitting in her chair, which was close enough to the door for her to have been able to reach me. She looked up at me with wide, crazed eyes, clasping 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 try to get away at first, but I'm sure that, if I had tried, I wouldn't have been able to very easily.

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.

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 picked up my music and left immediately.

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.