

## Song of Stanley · *Peter Nelson*

1.

STANLEY KNUTESON glanced from face to face, trying to determine which member of the music committee had sent him the note, which had read:

Dear Stanley,

I'm writing you because my conscience tells me I should. I thought you ought to know that there's been some talk on the committee. Some people feel that as long as we're replacing the organ (or repairing it or whatever we decide to do) that it might be a good time to replace the organist too. Everybody loves you as a person, but there have been some complaints about a lack of "inspiration" in the music of late, and other people just feel it might just be time for a change. We all agreed not to mention this to you until we'd had a chance to think about it some more, but I thought it only fair to warn you, so that you'd have a chance to respond before it's too late, and perhaps nip the whole thing in the bud. I hope I've done the right thing in telling you this.

A friend

He'd found the note on the seat of his car. It was typed, so he couldn't tell who'd written it, but he had a fair idea what was going on. A new couple had moved to the area and had yet to express a preference in churches. For Lutherans that meant either First Emmanuel in Onagle or Trinity in New Berlin. He was a doctor and she'd previously been the organist at Good Shepherd in Madison, and it was no secret that everybody wanted them.

"Just because it flies and eats bugs doesn't mean it's a bird," Eugene Hanson said. He was a farmer and a cynic, and as such, sought the fingerprints of God on all the surfaces of his life. Three of his fields, those which lay along the banks of the Turtle River, were still underwater, and in times of drought Eugene Hanson had been heard to remark, casting an eye

to the cloudless skies, "Guess we must not be paying the preacher enough," but of late had opined that a reduction in salary might be in order. Sometimes it was all his fellow Scandinavians in town could do to keep from laughing at the things he said. The topic today was whether or not to replace the defective church organ with a synthesizer.

"Well if it flies and eats bugs, who cares if it's a bird or a bat?" Lowell Coleman said, trying to contain his exasperation. He owned the music store on Division Street and was thought to be the cause of a third of the headaches and half the hearing loss in Onagle ever since he'd recognized, some time around 1975, that rock and roll was here to stay, and began stocking electronic equipment and amplifiers to supplement the trombones, trumpets and high school band instruments which had been his main stock in trade since he'd opened the store.

"The people who've been giving money to buy a bird, that's who," Mrs. LaVoie said. Her opinions were as impenetrable as her Christmas fruit-cakes. She'd been Stanley's mother's closest friend ever since their husbands disappeared together one Sunday afternoon, failing to show up for a church picnic and leaving everyone without the five bean casserole Mrs. LaVoie had made from a King Arthur recipe. After it was learned, some time later, that the two men were living together in Nevada, in a single bedroom house, no mention was ever made again of the scandal and Mrs. LaVoie forswore five bean casserole (and people who liked it) forever. "I for one don't want to turn around and look up and see a glowing piece of Japanese plastic," she added.

"I think," Pastor Leo said, "all Lowell is suggesting is that we consider current economic realities." Pastor Leo had recently admitted to Janine Kennedy that he'd never remembered a single dream he'd ever had in his life. He could not, therefore, be sure he did dream, but took it as an article of faith that he did. He believed in a great many things this way, without direct experience but fully confident that those who had had such experiences were not lying when they described them. Janine had felt awkward to hear his confession.

"The problem," Lowell Coleman said, "is thinking things are going to get better before they get worse. We have thirteen thousand seven hundred forty-six dollars and ninety-four cents. Most of that was raised last year. Half the people you talk to around here are saying we ought to dip into the organ fund to help with flood relief, and tempting as that might be, we're

all agreed we're not going to do that, right?" No one in the room said anything, though Eugene Hanson glanced out the window at the gray skies gathering again. "So, if we still have thirteen thousand seven hundred forty-six dollars and ninety-four cents to spend, what I'm saying is, you can't buy a decent pipe organ, new or used, anywhere, for thirteen thousand seven hundred forty-six dollars and ninety-four cents. We've looked. We can't get the Fulton repaired for that. So, logically, you do the best you can. And you can't buy, anywhere, for thirteen thousand seven hundred forty-six dollars and ninety-four cents, more sound than I'm offering. At cost. And it'll serve our purposes for the next hundred years. Or more."

"We shouldn't be afraid of something, just because it's new," said Janine Kennedy, the choir director. Lowell Coleman nodded in her direction to show her he appreciated her support, though she was looking at Stanley. Janine taught biology at the junior high school and, at thirty-seven and still single, was finding it harder and harder to sing at weddings, when people asked for her beautiful soprano voice, without feeling sad or empty afterwards or lingering too long at the punchbowl.

"At least I've heard it," Lowell Coleman said. "We shouldn't judge the system before we've heard it."

"System," Mrs. LaVoie said, the way people used to say *Negro* or *communist* or *liberal*. "We don't want a system. We want an organ, just like all churches have always wanted organs. Since organs were invented. That's *why* they were invented. I don't even see why we're talking about it."

"I think," Pastor Leo said, "we should hear from Stanley."

Stanley Knuteson felt the eyes of the music committee upon him. He did not like meetings and he especially didn't like speaking at meetings, particularly when he knew someone in attendance was out to get him, not the right way to think of it, perhaps, but the most useful. Sometimes he imagined eyes emitting invisible rays of light, like Superman or some killer robot. As a boy, he'd squint at the altar candles during services until the flames refracted into four-pointed stars, which he could rotate by turning his head or stretch from floor to sanctuary ceiling by squinting even harder. Sometimes as a boy he imagined he had x-ray vision and could see through women's clothing. Though never in church. Then one day he imagined he had x-ray vision and saw a tumor growing on Mrs. Horlick's left breast, and when she died of cancer within the year he stopped imagining he had

x-ray vision at all, but he liked squinting at the altar candles. His mother would slap his hand when she caught him not paying attention. God has no patience for daydreamers, she would say. As if to prove it, one December Sunday morning, while Stanley was serving as an altar boy, he was thinking about the Christmas presents he was going to get (possibly the miniature road-racing set he'd been lobbying for since his birthday the previous summer) when he caught the sleeve of his robe on the corner of the altar while lighting the candles and set the Christmas tree on fire, and might have burned down the church if Pastor Jahns hadn't been quick to douse the spark with holy water; as noble a purpose for holy water as any, Pastor Jahns later reassured young Stanley, who nevertheless thought he'd done something horribly sacrilegious, like feeding communion wafers to pigeons, and was sure to be punished for it. The eyes of the congregation were on him then, and high above them all, his mother's eyes, glaring at him from the balcony, all he could see of her face in the mirror mounted atop the Fulton's music desk. Sometimes her eyes looked like a raccoon's eyes, caught in a car's headlights at night.

Stanley's reputation for strangeness was, however, well established prior to igniting the Christmas tree. "Out there where the buses don't run," Eugene Hanson said of him.

"I'm not even sure I could play a synthesizer," he said.

"What?" Mrs. LaVoie said, struggling to hear. After her husband left, she'd driven the Allis Chalmers tractor herself. Most people in town who drove Allis Chalmers tractors prior to 1970 were hard of hearing.

"I said I'm not sure I'd know how to play one," Stanley repeated. "I tried using a computer once but I ended up erasing everything." Maybe you can't teach an old dog new tricks, and shouldn't try. He was forty-three years old, perhaps not an old dog yet, but he knew his limitations. He certainly had enough work to do already, between practicing and giving lessons and accompanying the dance classes at the high school. As for lacking inspiration, what was there to do about it? There were those who were born gifted, his mother had always explained, like Mozart or Haifitz, and then there were those who had to work at it, and through no fault of his own (or hers, he'd striven to assure her) he was numbered among the latter. He had no problem with that. He knew, of course, which way his mother would have voted on the organ/synthesizer issue if she were still alive. Agnes Knuteson had stood steadfastly against the new music less conservative

congregations had allowed into their liturgies. “Faith is timeless and eternal, so should its music be.” He recalled the time when it became known that down the road in New Berlin, St. John’s Presbyterian had even allowed a Beatles’ song to be played during services, on guitar, something called “I’ll Get By with a Little Help from my Friends.” Just what, Agnes Knuteson had wanted to know, was that supposed to mean? “Getting by” did not seem to her to be a sufficiently ambitious life’s goal for a true Christian. She hadn’t liked Stanley listening to rock and roll as a youth and didn’t allow it in the house, even when he played “Eleanor Rigby” for her to show her how it used classical violins and how the song seemed to address the same issues of spiritual apathy and moral bankruptcy that she was interested in herself. In one of only a few significant acts of youthful defiance, Stanley kept a small transistor radio he’d purchased with his paper route money hidden in his closet, listening to it under his pillow late at night when atmospheric conditions were right and he could get WLS out of Chicago, ceasing the practice only when he found it led to nocturnal emissions. It had taken all his persuasive powers to convince her to let him attend the polka dances in the church basement, until she agreed it was the only place to meet nice young ladies under supervised conditions. To her, there was only sacred music. Anything else she did not understand. She’d ramrodded the first organ drive that purchased the Fulton, back during the War; “No time to be fundraising, let me tell you.” It was her powerhouse style of play that delivered to the little town of Onagle the most beautiful sacred music it had ever heard, Agnes Knuteson’s award winning organ playing (the gold medal at the 1954 ULC Sacred Music Festival in Minot, North Dakota) that built First Emmanuel into the fourth largest Lutheran church in rural Iowa, her music that did it, and not the stodgy exegetics of Pastor Eaves, or the fervid evangelism of Pastor Berwein, and not the homey homilies of Pastor Jahns. First Emmanuel was no longer in the top thirty. The slide started in the late seventies, paralleling the decline in Stanley’s mother’s health, which paralleled that of the organ. She’d been almost forty when she had Stanley, and ten years older than her husband, Stanley’s father. Both organ and organist increasingly creaked in the joints, wheezed in the wind chest, rumbled in the lower octaves, became plugged at the pallet holes and clogged at the valves, inexorable. Both were patched up, tuned, tightened, lubricated and repaired piecemeal. When she was confined to a wheelchair, Stanley wheeled her wherever she wanted to go, made sure she took her

medications, invited her friends over and made tea, and finally filled in for her at the keyboard when a stroke took the music from her hands. She lingered for nearly a year and then died on a hot August day at home in her canopy bed, the light through the drawn shades filling the room with a golden glow. Stanley was alone. After the Vignes brothers came from the funeral home and arrangements were made, Stanley decided to go for a drive and ended up driving all the way to Iowa City, where at an off-campus movie theater, *Autumn Sonata* was playing, a foreign film about a strong-willed woman pianist and her troubled relations with her daughter, which had intrigued Stanley when he read about it in the paper. He bought a ticket, but at the last minute ducked into a different theater and watched *Animal House* instead. He laughed so hard he temporarily forgot his mother had died that day, and felt surprisingly guilt free about doing so afterwards, a phenomenon he subsequently ascribed to the shock he must have been feeling. When he returned home, because there was no one else in the county who knew how to play the Fulton, and because he'd been groomed for the role, he became the organist, though he knew he would never be as gifted as his mother—the children of geniuses seldom surpass their elders. His happiest moments of childhood were when his mother's playing transported him to places he'd never been before. Or since. He only hoped to be as good as he could be. He worked hard at it. But if there really had been complaints about his playing, and it wasn't just a ploy to offer the doctor's wife the job to get them to join First Emmanuel, maybe he needed to try something new.

He felt Janine Kennedy touch him on the arm.

"Stanley?" she said. He'd done it again. Sometimes his concentration just drifted away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was just thinking. I guess I'd hate to make a decision until I tried it once."

Lowell Coleman nodded in triumph while Eugene Hanson let out a deep breath.

"Your mother wouldn't have stood for it," Mrs. LaVoie said.

"I think," Pastor Leo said, interrupting the thought, "we should all hear what this thing can do before we make up our minds. We remember," he said, looking at Mrs. LaVoie, "there were those who objected to having a microphone in the pulpit, but now some of the same people have started to appreciate it."

“The salesman is coming through next week,” Lowell Coleman said. “I’ll call him and tell him to bring a demo.”

“Would you like a ride home?” Stanley asked Janine Kennedy, as the committee meeting broke up. He suspected she’d been the one who tried to warn him, and he wanted to talk to her. “I was wondering what you want to do for Christmas services. I know it’s a long ways off but if we need to order anything or have copies made, we should get started.”

“I’m sorry Stanley,” Janine said, “Lowell and I were going to run up to the Black Steer for a bite— would you like to come with?” Everybody knew that some day soon Lowell Coleman was going to ask Janine Kennedy to marry him. Given that he had a steady income and a house with enough space in the yard for a garden and was a widower with previous marital experience, he would be much better for her than Stanley, who therefore had no intention of coming between them, even in a casual way, until Lowell popped the question and it would be safe again. Nevertheless, in the past few months, Stanley had found himself thinking about Janine a lot, staring at her, and the way the lines made by the pleats of her choir robe accentuated and complimented the ample curves of her body. With her red hair and her constant cheer, she reminded him of a young, heavier Ann Margaret, though he would perhaps be the only person in town who saw the resemblance.

“I don’t think so,” he told her. “Maybe some other time. I have a lot of work to do.”

When he got home, he left his umbrella to dry on the front porch and fed his cat, Ives. He had a record from the library he intended to listen to, but as the overture began, he found himself staring at a truncated section of an organ pipe sitting on the mantle above the fireplace. It was a low G bass flue pipe about six inches in diameter, mounted on a wooden stand with a lid stoppering the top to form a canister. The canister had been fashioned by a friend of the family, and it contained Stanley’s mother’s ashes, kept in a cinerary urn that fit inside the vessel. Her request to be cremated had been unusual (Vignes Brother’s had to use a crematory in Des Moines) but for those who’d known her, going down in flames, short of a Viking funeral, was an appropriate way to honor and transform the force that had once been Agnes Knuteson. Next to the canister on the mantel was the gold medal from the 1954 ULC Sacred Music Festival in Minot, North Dakota, framed against black velvet, its red silk sash like the scarlet banner on a blackbird’s

wing. There'd been a Knuteson at the organ of First Emmanuel for over fifty years. Replacing him seemed somehow both inconceivable and overdue.

2.

"They'll be putting personal computers in your breakfast cereal by the year two thousand," the salesman said as he unpacked wires and cables and various pieces of equipment, all of it black and heavy and smelling oddly like rain. His name was Bart, and he was very shaggy, with wire-rimmed glasses and long hair and a beard, which was not so unusual to see, even in Onagle. What was unusual was that his hair was matted together in thick plaits, like a sheepdog that hadn't been brushed in years, that indeed could not be brushed. Stanley had never seen anything like it. It was almost frightening, or it would be if the salesman didn't have such a merry demeanor and gentle way of speaking. Bart was in his late twenties, Stanley guessed, younger than Stanley, but he knew enough to admire the pump organ Stanley's mother had at home to practice on.

"That an Appleton?" Bart asked.

"It sure is," Stanley said proudly.

"Some of those are worth fifteen thou' in good condition," Bart said.

"Really?" Stanley said.

"Well," Bart added, "yeah, as furniture. For sound, you gotta have one of these mothers."

He slapped the synthesizer on the end. It was about the width and length of an ironing board, but in line and finish it carried the personality of a sports car and created a similar illusion, appearing to be in motion while at rest. "Ten years ago you'd have paid a hundred thou' for this much sound, and you'd need a warehouse just to hold the hardware. Today it's twelve, and it's so expandable you'll never need anything else. That's where the Pfeifer people have it all over Roland and Yamaha—those guys'll build you five or ten different synths because there's that many markets, not because they can't figure out how to roll all their functions into one driver. Pfeifer only makes the SPXL. That's it. They're like Saab. So it costs more, but it's all you'll ever need."

He explained the workings of the Pfeifer SPXL to Stanley. He pronounced SPXL "special."



“L is for Laser,” Bart said. “This is pretty fresh. All your memory is optical, totally digital, and you have a gigabyte of re-write to work with—the old machines were limited to ten or twenty thousand events—this is, for all practical purposes, infinite. X means expandable—you can add sounds for the next hundred years, and there’s a toll-free on-line sound library you can download voices from, plus a user net bulletin board in case you need advice or just want to share discoveries. We got cats all across the country and in Europe doing amazing shit with these things, but the beautiful thing is nobody’s being too anal about protecting it because we know if we all work together, in a few years, we’ll be able to take over the world. You have an internal 24,000 baud modem and a Pentium chip with sixteen meg’ of RAM standard and a peripheral QWERTY keyboard you can plug into the back and your pop-up track ball here, though once you get used to it you can drive most of the computer functions from the piano keys. The company guarantees you upgrade discounts and just between you and me, they’re working on a virtual reality interface which in a few years will put you into some serious cyber-acoustic playgrounds. P is programmable, meaning anything you have, you can change the parameters of, with these buttons here: waveform, attack, decay, sustain, release, touch and after-touch, oscillation, modulation, reverb, chorus, compression, intervals, detuning, all the usuals; or, if you don’t want to use the number pad, you use the slide, the joystick or your foot pedal. S is for sampler. Sampling means you can take any sound that already exists, electronic or acoustic, enter it on tape, disk, modem, or you can sample through the built-in mike. The machine encodes the sound digitally, or *samples* it, makes a computer model and then gives it back to you. Put the headphones on.”

Stanley understood little of what Bart had just said, and probably wouldn’t have even if he spoke more slowly, but he was good with manuals if they were written properly. He donned the headphones while Bart turned the synthesizer on. Stanley expected to hear some sort of ignition sound, a whirring or a hum, but instead saw only a series of red lights blink, and then a small 6” x 8” rectangular screen set into the top of the machine light up, glowing an eerie blue-green, like antifreeze spilled on a driveway. The salesman pressed some buttons, manipulating the words on the screen, and then played a brief phrase. Stanley heard the voice of a lovely tenor.

“Guess who?” Bart said. “Caruso. Sampled it straight off the old wax masters. We got Pavoratti too, before he lost it, but we had to pay him.

Domingo went with Yamaha but I never dug him that much anyway. I wrote Pfeifer a letter saying they had to get Louis Armstrong, but no one listens to me.”

Stanley nodded to appear knowledgeable.

“You mainly want organ, right?” Bart said. “Okay, one step at a time. You got thirty-two resident organs. Organs are in the O bank, which you call up like so. Now, you number up or down to choose which one you want—I suspect the bandoneon and the B3 are out. Number 0-10, for example, is the Hindemeir that Bach himself played when he was *kapellmeister* in Leipzig. Some players split the keyboard for great and swell or program up and down with the foot pedal, but what I usually suggest is that you midi up a second board, split the bottom octave for bass and stack the first five or six voices with after-touch control for full. The parameters are all pre-configured at the standard stops, diapason, dulciana and what have you, and with a little practice, you’ll learn to reset in mid-performance. Then the value pedal becomes the swell and the volume is the crescendo, though in fact it also adds Fat and Chorus at the same time.”

“If you’ll just wait a second, I’ll get some paper so I can take notes. . . .”

“Notes schmotes,” Bart said, “we’re strictly Suzuki here—put the phones back on and I’ll show you.”

Stanley put the headphones back on. Bart began to play a Bach prelude. Stanley closed his eyes and listened. He couldn’t believe what he heard. It was as if he were dead center in one of the great cathedrals of Europe. He opened his eyes, expecting to see stained glass windows and stations of the cross chiseled into his living room walls.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Bart said, stopping. “You have a resident digital reverb you can set from shoe box to arena. Gated, reverse, delay, whatever you want. The only thing that could make it more authentic would be people coughing, right? Okay, cough.”

“What?” Stanley said.

“Turn your head and cough,” Bart said. The salesman laughed. Stanley coughed.

“Again.”

Stanley coughed again.

“Now wait a minute. . . .”

Bart pressed a button and then wiggled a piece of paper in the air.

“Now listen,” Bart said. He pressed a button. The prelude began again, but Bart wasn’t playing it. At a rest, the salesman hit a key, and Stanley heard himself cough. Bart hit ten keys and Stanley heard ten people cough, big men with deep coughs and small children with high pitched small coughs. Bart hit another key during a quiet passage and Stanley heard the paper flapping, as if someone were turning the page in their bulletin. Bart stopped the music.

“I sequenced the chorale a couple weeks ago and put it on two tracks to pan back in stereo. The acoustic sensibility of the automatic mixing program is way-wicked advanced, but it’s up to you how hands-off you want to be about it. Add a few effects, like coughs or paper flapping, and it sounds so authentic nobody can tell the difference between a sequenced performance and a recording of a live performance. You can do a whole song, a phrase, an arpeggiated note, a groove, if you’re still into disco. . . . It’s all up to you. Give it a shot.”

“Now?”

“Well, sooner rather than later. I do have another stop today.”

Stanley stepped up to the keyboard and played a C-chord. He could hear no difference between what he played and the sound of a real church organ. It was, in fact, better than the Fulton. Perhaps even more “inspirational.” He stopped.

“Go with it,” Bart said, but Stanley stepped away.

“What do you mean by sequencing?” Stanley asked. “I mean, I know what the word ‘sequence’ means. . . .”

“It’s just the name of the process,” Bart explained. “What you’re doing, on disk, is creating a fancy digital piano roll, like they use in player pianos. You make a set of instructions for the computer to give back to the synthesizer, hit this note, this hard, at this point, for this long, and each one of those notes or occasions is called an event. The onboard computer is pre-loaded with a sixty-four track sequencer and thirty-two midi channels and a thirty-two bit processor which gives you, in effect, a professional internal digital recording studio with full graphic editing capabilities. In other words, you could lay down sixty-four tracks and play sixty-four different instruments at the same time.”

“Not me,” Stanley joked. “I tried the clarinet once and practically made the cat run away.” Bart shook his head.

“You just play the keyboard,” he said. “The synth’ does the rest. Though you should still stay away from the reeds bank—the intonations suck. In my opinion. But once you figure it out, you could be a full symphony if you want, program your whole church service, push a button, and while the congregation thinks they’re hearing the New York Phil’, you’re out back smoking a bone.”

“It’s fantastic,” Stanley said. “I don’t know what else to say.” Bart was examining the organ-pipe canister on the mantel. He turned back to Stanley.

“You haven’t really heard it yet,” Bart said. “You get down into the X, Y and Z files and the pads and the FX, and you’re into total sonic futurism. Some of this stuff gets you high, I swear to God—put the phones back on.”

Stanley hesitated.

“Don’t be afraid, man,” Bart said. “It doesn’t really get you high. It’s just really cool.”

Stanley put the phones back on.

Bart played. Before Stanley could actually hear anything, he felt something, like joy, or like confidence, a soothing bath of warmth and acceptance, and then a few low notes, unshaped, like wind down a tunnel or breath across a very large soda bottle, slowly rounding in timbre, the resonance honing finer and finer until the tone was more like the shimmering after-ring of a tubular gong, rising in sharpness until it twisted into a piercing whistle that made Stanley wince.

“Ooops,” Bart said. “Pushed it too far. That was Z-14, which was sent to us by this holistic music-healer dude in San Francisco who’s been sampling Tibetan monks. It’s almost inner child abuse, but the monks say they have different chants to match the sympathetic harmonics of human body tissue which allows them to chant away tumors by identifying the resonating frequencies, which I always thought was crap until doctors started using ultrasound to smash kidney stones almost the same way.” Stanley put the headphones down, not quite sure he liked what had just happened to him, or rather, feeling more and more sure that he didn’t, like he’d just swallowed something without reading the ingredients first to see what was in it.

“You’ll be using the O bank primarily, but you’ll have a lot of fun in the X, Y and Z files, so don’t be shy,” Bart said, packing up.

“Where did you learn to play so well?” Stanley asked.

“In the shed, man,” Bart said. “I majored in keys at the U’ and got this job after I got my degree. Now I rep’ the whole state for Pfeiffer. I’ve played organ since I was about twelve.”

“In churches?”

“In garages,” Bart said, winding a chord around his hand and elbow. “And VFW posts, and legion halls, and weddings for couples where everybody but the band and the caterers thought the newlyweds were going to live happily ever after.”

“Have you ever played in church?”

“Seriously?” Bart said. He seemed both amused and reluctant to answer. Stanley wanted to ask Bart if he wouldn’t like to demonstrate his product for the congregation himself, but now sensed the request would be inappropriate.

“Are you an atheist?” Stanley was surprised to hear himself ask instead. He’d never asked anyone before, probably because he’d never met anyone who’d made him wonder. His mother had, of course, explained to him how, when atheists died, they didn’t go to heaven. How anybody could make such a conscious choice was beyond Stanley’s comprehension. “Then where do they go?” Stanley had asked. Mrs. LaVoie, who’d been present at the discussion, suggested perhaps they went to Jupiter, and added that it wasn’t just atheists—it was Buddhists and Moslems and all kinds of people, though needless to say, Jupiter was just a guess.

“That’s nobody’s business,” Bart said quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Stanley said. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“The music comes before the meanings assigned to it,” Bart said. “Art is older than religion—babies and white rats respond to music. Music is nature, and nature is neutral. At least Ansel Adams thought so. I’m not interested in people who think they can drive a stake in the sky and say ‘this belongs to me.’ Whatever.”

The salesman went out to his car, returning with a thick manual. Stanley thought about what the salesman had said, but when Bart asked Stanley if he had any questions, Stanley said nothing. He walked the salesman to the door.

“Enjoy,” Bart said. “You’ll get used to this. It’s a lot easier than it looks. Just play with it, see what you think. You’ll never go back to what you knew before. You’ll never be the same again, I guarantee.” Bart handed Stanley his card. “Call me if you have any problems.” The card said *Bart*

3.

Stanley didn't touch the synthesizer the rest of that day, or the following morning. He told himself he was too busy, though he had nothing else as pressing on his schedule. He cleaned his house and mowed his yard and put a load of laundry in the washing machine and made a few notes on the Christmas program and borrowed a tape from the library because one of his piano students had asked his opinion of a musician named George Winston. It was impossible to form one. He stared at the machine while he ate his lunch, a BLT with pickles. His duty was to provide the congregation he served the best music he could, and demonstrate what they could get for their money. But . . . in the synthesizer he'd been given the ability, or more correctly speaking, been enabled to create music of greater complexity and scope than anything his mother had ever dreamed of, even staying within traditional idioms and conservative tastes. Mrs. LaVoie was right—his mother wouldn't have stood for it. He felt vaguely apprehensive, but he didn't want to be like Mrs. LaVoie, who was stupid and superstitious, however well she meant.

He was thinking about turning the machine on when he heard a knock at the door. Eugene Hanson had come into town to do some banking, and stopped by to see what he called “the gizmo.” Stanley led him into the living room.

“That it?” Eugene Hanson said, examining it the way a sheep rancher might look at his first llama.

“That's it,” Stanley told him.

“Hmmm,” the farmer said, running his finger across the top of it. “Eleven thousand dollars. I lived in three or four houses you could have bought for that. Of course the first one wasn't much bigger than the box this came in, I suspect. So what's it sound like?”

“It sounds good. It sounds like an organ,” Stanley said. “And a number of other things too. It sounds like things that don't even exist.”

“So let's hear it,” Eugene Hanson said.

“Well, you will,” Stanley said, “but I have to read the manual first. So far, I’m not even sure where the on button is.” It wasn’t like him to lie, but he couldn’t think of what else to say.

“That would be important,” Eugene Hanson said. He looked at Stanley. “Do you feel uncomfortable about this, Stanley?”

“A little,” Stanley said. “It’s the way I was raised. Mother’s people were faith healers, you know. When I broke my arm in high school, she wouldn’t let them x-ray it. I’m just not big on machines.” The telephone answering machine the choir had presented him with at Christmas was still in the box it came in, upstairs in his closet.

“You know Zeller?” Hanson said. “The young Amish fella down from me, towards Goodhue?”

“I don’t know him, but I know who he is.”

“Saw him on rollerblades the other day. Thought my eyes would fall right out of my head.”

Stanley gathered the point of the story was to remain open to change. He confided, only half joking, that he hoped for a sign—maybe a fuse would blow and that would be the end of it. Hanson cocked an eyebrow at him.

“You hear about the farmer down in Missouri who got flooded out last week?” he asked.

“Which one?” Stanley said.

“Well this particular one—and of course, you know that if Missouri annexed the southernmost tier of Iowa counties, the average I.Q. of both states would go up fifty percent—but this one was sitting on his roof, with the Mississippi rising all around him, when a neighbor in a canoe comes by and asks him if he wants to get in. Fella says no thanks, the Lord’ll take care of him. The waters keep rising, a Coast Guard boat comes by and the guy still says, no thanks, Lord’ll take care of him. Water keeps rising, to where the fella has to sit on his chimney, and a helicopter comes by and lowers a rope to him, but he waves ’em off and says no thanks, thank you kindly, but he trusts in the Lord.”

“And what happened?”

“He drowned,” Eugene Hanson said.

“Oh dear,” Stanley said.

“So he goes up to heaven,” Eugene Hanson continued, “and when he gets there. . . .”

“So this is a joke.”

“No, this is a true story,” Eugene Hanson insisted. “So he gets up to heaven, and he meets the Lord and says, ‘What happened—I thought you were going to save me?’ Lord says, ‘Well what the heck did you want? We sent a canoe, a Coast Guard boat, and a helicopter!’ Lord helps those who helps themselves, Stanley. It’s a good thing to remember. Especially at smorgasbords. Help yourself, I always say.”

Stanley spent the rest of the day thinking about change, and how much he depended on his routines to give his life shape and meaning. It wasn’t as if the synthesizer was going to throw all of that off, but the salesman’s words, “You’ll never be the same again,” were truly terrifying. He wanted to be the same again. To not be the same again would be like working your whole life on a test question and then being handed a new question before you’d answered the first one. And it wasn’t really setting loose demons he feared. It was losing God, or finding a new one, one he’d never understand, not that he understood the one he had, but at least there were people trying to help him. He didn’t like change, and didn’t want to find something he couldn’t share, or something less than what he already had. And when he really thought about it, what he was afraid of most was being overwhelmed by ideas too powerful to control, like the Holy Rollers or the homosexuals his mother had so frequently inveighed against. He recalled once as an altar boy when the sermon topic had been the Pentecost. The idea of suddenly speaking in tongues had rendered him so panic-stricken that he began to mutter under his breath, “Testing . . . testing . . . one two three . . .” until Pastor Jahns had to shush him. Sudden enormous change was a real possibility. And then to never go back to what he’d known? And be left where?

But then, what did any of that have to do with music? It was just a synthesizer—a glorified accordion. He tried to guess what Leonard Bernstein would do. He certainly wouldn’t be afraid. Mozart wouldn’t be afraid. Benjamin Franklin or Charles Ives or Muhammed Ali or any of his heroes wouldn’t be afraid.

He glanced at the urn on the mantel. It was just his imagination, but it looked as if the corners of the flue were downturned at the lower lip, as if it were frowning at him. He rotated the vessel until the wind way faced the wall.

The evening of the second day, he turned on the Pfeifer SPXL and donned the headphones. He began in the piano file, *Chopsticks* on a sampled



Steinway concert grand. The touch was sensitive, action silent and light, tone crystal pure. He had twelve grand pianos to choose from. The uprights were equally impressive, the harpsichords, single or coupled, even better. Clavichord, honky-tonk piano, hammer dulcimer—they were all wonderful, and he felt a bit foolish for having worried about it. Anticipation was always the worst part of a new experience, wasn't it? He went into the O file and played through all the organs: monkey grinder, calliope, orchestrium, electric, pump, reed, full chapel. The power at his fingertips was beyond words. He skipped dinner. He went to his mother's library for scores and played Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*, Bach's *Fantasy in G*, the hornpipe from Handel's *Water Music Suite*. From the street, a passerby might have thought crazy old Stanley Knuteson had fallen asleep on the couch again, listening to records, but long after midnight he was still awake, in the string file by one A.M., bowing cellos, plucking violins *pizzicato*, recreating pieces he'd loved as a boy, Tchaikovsky's *Serenade in C*, Borodin's *String Quartet no. 2 in D*, Barber's *Adagio*. The music came from Stanley's fingers, not from the stereo. The beauty was terrifying, freeing his soul to soar but promising to send him crashing to earth when the music stopped. Part of his fear of beauty before was that he might, by producing it, lose his awe of it, but now that he was producing it, the awe was even greater—it was as if the beauty he heard were creating him. Creating a hunger and simultaneously sating it. It couldn't be healthy. He stopped to lie on the couch and rest his eyes a few minutes, exhausted and dizzy. What right had he to create beauty? What an ego to even think that way, and how dangerous to become prideful. But it was undeniable.

As he slept, the synth' stood across the room, red lights lit, waiting for him to awaken.

#### 4.

It was Saturday night in the First Emmanuel chapel, and the lights were still on as two men set about their business.

"Some people are going to walk around heaven with paper bags over their heads so they can keep thinking they're the only ones there," Lowell Coleman said. "Nothing we can do about people like that, is there?" He paused from his wires and patch chords, waiting for a response from Stanley. "This is probably more speaker'n we need, but we might as well

make the best impression.” Large black amplifiers were set to either side of the balcony. “Subwoofer oughtta shake the pews just like the real thing.” He wiped his hands on his pants. “Stanley? Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry—what?” Stanley said.

“Take it off ‘headphones’ and give me a bit here so’s I can set the levels,” Lowell Coleman said. “Maximum crescendo.”

Stanley returned to the organ bank and played a chord.

“Holy cow!” Lowell Coleman said. He looked up. “Pardon the expression. Let’s don’t blow the windows out.” He turned the master volume down. “I’ll go downstairs and you can give it to me again.” Stanley heard Lowell Coleman’s footsteps clapping down the center aisle, like someone was bowling with turtles. The older man called out from the baptistry. Stanley played the chord again.

“Terrific,” Lowell Coleman shouted. “Tom’ll be locking up soon—you need a ride?”

“No thank you,” Stanley said.

“Tonight’s the night,” Lowell called up to him. Stanley knew what Lowell was talking about but chose not to ask. “I’m taking Janine down to the Inn and look at this—you see it from up there? You oughtta be able to, for what I paid for it.” Stanley turned around. Lowell Coleman held up a small jewelry box containing a diamond engagement ring. “Come tomorrow, I just might have an announcement to make. But don’t say anything until I do, if you don’t mind. Aren’t you going to wish me luck?”

“By all means,” Stanley said. “Tell her I said hello.”

“You’re sure you don’t want a ride?”

“I think I’ll stay and practice,” Stanley replied, putting the headphones back on before the music dealer could say anything more.

On Wednesday, he’d learned to sequence. By the end of the night, he’d laid down the entire *Messiah* of Handel. The vocal samplings couldn’t compile words or consonants, but it didn’t matter. For fun, he played the pieces back in offbeat voicings, Handel’s *Messiah* for sitars and bagpipes, crystal goblets and water droplets. He found he could play better than he ever had before, a dramatic improvement in sheer technique. He could watch his fingers, as if his hands weren’t part of him anymore.

On Thursday, he’d ventured into the X, Y and Z files. He might as well have flown like a bird through the Milky Way eating stars, for the glory he found there. Chords glistened and shimmered like the northern lights.

Tones opened and closed like flowers, merged and subdivided, glided by octaves in tumbling spirals off opposite ends of the aural spectrum, circling the world to re-enter in the other ear, cascading in sweeps of *portamento* confusion, climbing by steps, falling like a roller coaster. Frequencies modulated from cycles of once a second to a thousand, while glowing tones pyramided in shifting phases. Airplanes took off; helicopters landed; monsters walked the earth; prehistoric birds cried out in hungry squawks; continents wrenched apart in grinding tectonic lifts and folds; loons mated; gridlocks of honks and bleats formed and dissipated; drums boomed and throbbed from the center of the planet, while cymbals crashed from the mountain tops, splintering the night stars like icicles falling onto a concrete driveway. When the phone rang, during a pause, it took him a moment to realize he wasn't making the sound himself. He ignored it for as long as he could, but it kept ringing. It was Janine Kennedy.

"Stanley?" she said. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm sorry," he said, "I had the headphones on."

"It's Thursday night," she reminded him.

"Yes, it is," he agreed.

"Well," she said gently, "we're all waiting for you." He'd missed choir practice.

"Oh no," he said. "I'll be right there."

After practice, Janine asked him if he wanted to go out for coffee. She said she worried about him, rattling around in that big old house all alone. Did he ever get lonely? Or think about living with someone? Either a roommate or. . . . Her Tercel reached the curb in front of his house, and he noticed he'd left all the lights on.

"It looks like you're having a party," she said.

"Why don't you come in? I'll make coffee," he said. "If I have any. I haven't been shopping."

He hadn't invited a young lady over to his house socially for years. In the past he'd complained about the lack of eligible women his age in Onagle, but there wasn't much he could do about it, so there wasn't much point in complaining, nor was there much sense fooling himself into thinking he was the sort of man many women were looking for. If he ever had been, his best days were certainly behind him. There'd been Eileen, in college; and Cheryl, who'd helped him a great deal when his mother passed away, though nothing lastingly romantic ever developed despite their best efforts;

and then there was the single one-night stand of his life, in Des Moines, at the Howard Johnson's, where the choirs had stayed during a gospel festival, a woman named Marietta Metzler who'd come all the way from Chicago with a group that was over half black. He'd never thought, as his mother did, that sex outside of marriage was sinful, but he did feel sex outside of love was, and love meant you'd get married someday, or you at least had to believe you would. The night with Marietta Metzler had been a chance to test the theory, he'd thought at the time. They'd both agreed the next morning that they'd made a mistake, but sometimes when Stanley realized his prayer that Marietta Metzler not get pregnant had been answered, he wasn't entirely sure he'd gotten the answer he really wanted. Somewhere along the line, at any rate, his chance had come and gone without really announcing itself.

"I could come by tomorrow and help you straighten up if you're too busy," Janine said, surveying the mess that had once been an orderly living room. There were pages of sheet music and Hostess Cupcake wrappers and pairs of white socks all over the place, and the couch where Stanley had slept the past two nights was in disarray, with blankets and pillows and his grandmother's lace antimacassars half on the floor.

"I wanted to show you this," he told her, holding his arm out over the Pfeifer SPXL. "What do you think? Isn't it amazing? Can I get you anything to drink? If you don't want coffee, I've got Scotch and bourbon." He disappeared into the kitchen, returning with two glasses.

"Stanley, my lord—I didn't know you drank whiskey," she said.

"Well I don't, ordinarily, but last night I was playing jazz so I ran out and got some because I felt I needed to get the full experience." He'd even considered calling Bart to see if he had any marijuana, but thought about it too long and lost his nerve.

"You were playing jazz?" she said, taking a step back from him and looking at him like he had a frog growing out of his forehead. "What kind of jazz?"

"Oh, you know, mostly stuff from *Oklahoma* and whatever they had in books at the library. I never realized how beautiful some of those songs could be. You can be quite a vibraphonist if you use your fingers like mallets. Ice?"

"Just straight," she said, still nonplussed. "Scotch, I think."

"I don't know if it's any good," Stanley said, pouring. "I asked the man at the store to recommend something. I had to go all the way to New Berlin to get it. By the way, thank you for the note."

"What note?"

"The note you left on the seat of my car. I appreciate that you thought to warn me."

"Stanley, please, don't take it the wrong way— I wasn't supposed to say anything because Mrs. LaVoie and some of her. . . ."

"Forget about it," Stanley said. "It doesn't matter any more. It's all taken care of. Will you sing with me?"

"Will I what?"

"Will you sing with me? Listen." He turned the synthesizer on, as well as the stereo, which he'd wired to receive signals from the synth' so that he didn't have to play through the headphones all the time. He found the song he'd sequenced and hit the play button. They heard a string section, then brass, like a small band might play from a summer lakeside band shell.

"Lyda-Rose-I'm-home-again-Rose, without-a-sweetheart-to-my-name," he sang. "From last year, when we did *The Music Man* at school. Remember?"

"Well sure I do, but . . ."

"Lyda-Rose, now-everyone-knows-that-I'm-a-hopin'-you're-the-same—ding-dong-ding. . . . Go on, sing it."

"Ding-dong-ding, can't-you-hear-the-chapel-bells-chime—ding-dong-ding—at-the-least-suggestion-I'll-pop-the-question— you did all this?"

"All of it," he said. "Every instrument you're hearing. Okay now, here comes the counter melody—you stay with Lyda Rose. . . ."

"But. . . ."

"It's a motet. Lyda. . . ."

"Rose-I'm-home-again-Rose. . . ."

"Dream-of-me-dream-of-love," he sang, "dream-of-a-love-song-that-I-have-found, and-I-love-you, oh-yes-I-love-you, and-I-will-tell-you-when-you-are-in-my-arms-again. . . ." The second time through, they switched parts. Janine's voice was as beautiful as her red hair, which was only slightly more beautiful than her face, which was as beautiful as he'd ever seen it, once she smiled when he took her in his arms and danced her around the room during the instrumental he'd programmed, a ballsy muted trumpet solo. The song modulated up a full step for the final chorus, which they

sang in two-part harmony, and when they were done, he dipped her before releasing her.

“Oh Stanley,” she said at last, laughing and catching her breath. “That was marvelous. I didn’t know you danced either—you did all that? I can’t believe it.”

“That ain’t the half of it,” he told her. “I’ve never felt this good in my whole life. I can’t tell you.”

“I’m very happy for you.”

“Don’t bother—I’m happy enough for both of us,” he said. He took a step towards her.

“I should probably be going,” she told him. Suddenly everything was awkward. It was as if his mood threatened her. Well, he thought, maybe it should. “You know, with school tomorrow and everything. . . .”

“I want to kiss you.”

“Oh God, Stanley,” she said. She seemed shocked, but she wasn’t walking away or changing the subject. “Do you mean it?”

“I wouldn’t say it just to tease you. I really want to kiss you.”

“Why?”

“Why? What kind of a question is that, why? You teach biology—you tell me. Unless you don’t like me. I mean, you don’t have to.”

“No, I do like you. I’m just not used to such sudden ideas.”

“What’s sudden? Who’s timing us? I mean, if you don’t want to, then fine. . . .”

“I do want to,” she said softly. “Really. It’s okay.”

They fit together awkwardly at first, because she was slightly taller than he was, and wore an adult retainer on her upper row of teeth, but they found themselves capable of making rapid adjustments. He closed his eyes like he’d been kissing women all his life. Stanley could not be certain, but he believed his kissing abilities had improved along with his musical technique. Maybe it was the Scotch. Maybe it was the jazz. Someone once told him trombone players were the worst kissers in any band, and among those, Lutheran trombone players were the worst of all. Janine was as soft and as warm as he’d ever imagined she would be. They were breathing heavily by the time they broke it off.

“Wow,” she said, staring at him wide-eyed. A wisp of hair fell across her forehead. “That was a good kiss.”

“I can do better.”

“I have to go home now.”

“Stay the night.”

“Stanley. . . .”

“I’m not going to beat around the bush anymore, Janine. I can’t. If that bush isn’t totally beaten by now, it never will be. Please stay with me.” She stepped back from his embrace and went to pick up her briefcase.

“This is just too much,” she said, straightening herself up and smoothing out her blouse. “I just need some time to think. First Pastor Leo and then Lowell. . . .”

“Pastor Leo?”

“Well, that wasn’t anything, really. . . .”

“Janine. . . .”

“Stanley, you’re a sweet man. And maybe some day . . . some day soon, we’ll see. I guess I don’t have to say I want to see you again because we see each other all the time.” She bit her lip, considering, then smiled again. “Why don’t you call me tomorrow night and maybe we can see a movie? Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Right now I need to go home.”

She bent over and kissed him one more time on the forehead. He heard her Tercel start up in the driveway. It sounded like something from the X bank, a sharp brittle attack with a mellow decay. He imagined a lawn mower plowing through eight feet of oatmeal.

The next day, something even more astonishing happened. He began to compose.

He’d walked down to the bakery for sweet rolls about seven in the morning. When he got home, he sat down at the Pfeiffer with a Danish in one hand to noodle around while he waited for the coffee to brew. He played a melody, then tried to remember where he’d heard it before, then realized—he hadn’t. How simple it was. A few notes, then a few more, notes connecting in a way that simply seemed right. “You are a vehicle,” his mother had coached him. “You should use what gifts you have to play the music the way it was meant to be played. That’s all. You are not the object of attention—people come to hear Bach, not Stanley Knuteson. The greater your commitment to the masters, the better the music will be.” But the mathematics of Bach couldn’t approach the binary precision of the synthesizer. And besides, if you made it up yourself, you could play it any

way you wanted to. The melody needed a harmony. And a bass line. Obviously. Why not a counter melody, like when they sang Lyda Rose? It all fell together. Suddenly, the more Stanley heard, the more he could imagine hearing, which was a better kind of hearing, midway between prophecy and epiphany. He never dreamed in a million years he'd understand how music was made, where it came from, *de profundis*, before it existed. He used to tell his students it was one of the great mysteries of life. Now he could see music like color and understand it like language and taste it like food. Notes demanded chords behind them, phrases insisted on answers, answers begged new questions, melodies guiding the ear, harmonies forming the landscape, dictating the journey, the sequence of events, mood changes diverting it, accelerating, retarding, structures building themselves before his very ears, simplicity begetting complexity and back again. He couldn't write it down fast enough, but he could sequence it, assign different instruments to each part, pan it around or bounce it back and forth, slow a sequence down to play a complicated solo and then speed it back up. He layered synthetic sounds over acoustically sampled ones, added percussion at random and then quantized it until the computer moved each beat exactly to the nearest sixteenth note. Atonal intrusions, chaos becoming order, polyphonic passages paring down to lean minimalist *intermezzos*. It came pouring out of him, like a tank springing a thousand leaks. He styled an *adagio* around a Tibetan chant for the dead, murmured in Gregorian modality, that made him weep. He wrote a comic *oratorio* of whoops, bellows and yodels that made him laugh. A doxology of African drums, kalimba, Japanese koto and lute. It just kept coming. He knew he should have been rehearsing the hymns he was to perform on Sunday, but his own music was all he wanted to play anymore. That music existed—this music was being born. The most incredible thing he'd ever heard about music, that sometimes composers, such as Mozart, heard entire symphonies in their head, all at once, which had seemed so preposterous before, now seemed almost obvious. He kept writing music. He forgot what time it was, or what his name was, or where he lived, or what year it was. . . .

And he forgot to call Janine Kennedy, and with the headphones on, he didn't hear the phone ring when she called, or the knock at the door when she drove past and saw the lights on.

"Stay and practice then," Lowell Coleman called up to him. "I for one got more important things on my mind."



Stanley hadn't remembered to call Janine until the next morning. He could neither explain nor apologize, but when he asked her if she wanted to join him for lunch, she said that considering everything, it was probably best that they not think of each other in social terms.

"Good night," Stanley called back to Lowell.

He plunged back into the music. He didn't want to be away from the instrument, didn't want the music in his head to stop, didn't want to lose any of it. When Tom, the custodian, finally said he had to lock up, Stanley went home and tried to play the Appleton, but Bart was right—he couldn't go back to what he'd known before. It was so inadequate. It was, in fact, who he used to be, thin and reedy and five hundred years behind the times. He only found comfort when he thought that perhaps if he wrote Janine a symphony, she might change her mind about him.

## 5.

The hymns for the trial service, chosen by the committee, were all old standards, benchmarks by which any organ might be measured. *A Mighty Fortress* would be the processional. *I Love to Tell the Story* was to be the anthem, and *Holy Holy Holy* would be the postlude. When Pastor Leo gave the nod to begin the processional, Stanley struck only the notes written, but he heard many more. When he finished, he looked in the rearview mirror to see people glancing over their shoulders at him. It was warm, and the congregation sat fanning themselves with their bulletins. He was ready to feed them a banquet, but all they wanted was a snack.

And *they* found *him* uninspirational.

Janine sat in the balcony's front row, going over her sheet music and her notes. She'd yet to even look at him. He could see her hands and did not see an engagement ring on either of them, but before the service, Lowell Coleman had said, "Be sure to stick around for coffee hour—I'll have an announcement to make."

The reading from the scripture was the story of Daniel in the lion's den. The sermon was going to be about courage. Pastor Leo, it seemed, was pushing for the synthesizer. With all the rain and the flooding they'd had lately, Stanley was certainly tired of hearing sermons about Noah and the flood. He'd never really realized how unimaginative and literal Pastor Leo's homilies were before now. Stanley squinted at the candle flames. Each flame

was one clear bright tone, splintering like fireworks on the 4th of July, a fraction rocketing high and dovetailing, another striking out into the bass octaves, two smaller fractiles breaking off to either side in stereo. There were twelve candles in all, sixty-four notes, Stanley thought, clustering like reeds in a stream. Janine often took her classes on field trips into the wetlands out by the Isaac Walton League clubhouse—she'd know what reeds clustered in a stream would sound like when she heard it.

“It's good to see you all today,” Pastor Leo said from the pulpit. “Particularly since the forecast this morning said they expect the rain to hold off, which is good news. After forty days and forty nights, or actually it's been more than forty, today we have something that might help us take our minds off our troubles, which is one of the many wonderful things music does for us. As you know, this is something of a special day, as we're gathered to decide the question of how we might provide ourselves with. . . .”

Stanley tried to pay attention, but a flock of geese had landed in his hair, making a cacophonous stir that seemed to want a descant in flute, or possibly the littoral sibilance of water, detuned droplets beginning as a trickle, wrapped around a riparian *ostinato* of tubas or bass viola, the tubas following the geese south until. . . . He heard Janine cough, without looking at him, and then he glanced in the rearview mirror to see Pastor Leo looking up at him, waiting with an unperturbable but expectant look on his face. He launched into *I Love to Tell the Story*.

The sermon began.

The song in Stanley's head would have to be a *pastorale*. Even if he abandoned the geese motif, which he was inclined to do, the more insinuating the flutes became, meadowlarks instead of geese, perhaps, smaller birds but more of them, pleading to be the *scherzo* before the *allegretto*, maybe a carol to high summer, opened by—why not? The sound of people fanning themselves with church bulletins. He put the headphones on and sampled the congregation, the sound of flapping paper coming up to him mellisonant and silvery. If Pastor Leo was as long winded as usual, Stanley figured he had a good half an hour before the offertory. If he finished before coffee hour. . . . The third movement would be the storm, the floods, the kiss with Janine, but first things first. Maybe . . . a train. Somebody leaving somebody, or pursuing them. The train whistle? Maybe a hundred whistles, a thousand, for all the sad trains carrying people who

loved each other away from each other. The train's rhythm too—that was a no-brainer. He readjusted the headphones and began to play, full out, the music pouring through him and filling him. Begin at dawn. Sunrise. A single bird. Dew. A dog barks somewhere down an alley, with his head in an overturned trash can. Reverb. Begin with the music of early morning, and a meadowlark sitting on a fence. The summer heat rising, steaming off the dew. Fog in the trees, trunks black like veins draining the night back into the earth. Some kid working in a cemetery mowing the grass starts his lawn mower. The sound of aluminum trays clattering through the back screen door of a bakery making cheese Danish. His mouth watered. He played full out, music a sea to swim in, the air he breathed, his whole life, the way it had never been before, when it merely answered the obligations he felt to his mother or to God, something he believed he *should* do—now it was something he *had* to do, because he could not choose not to do it. Meadowlarks. Dawn. Why not people, romance, lovers, music with people in it, like the world had people in it? He imagined himself and Janine Kennedy, walking hand in hand around a lake. Wave motions, saw-toothed, lapping the shore. Something calm and soothing, suffused through a ninth chord with a bass fifth.

He played with his whole heart, his eyes closed, unaware that though he'd engaged the headphones, he had failed to *disengage* the loudspeakers.

In the rush of creation, he had forgotten.

He felt a tap at his shoulder, but he ignored it, just some stubborn goose, angry at being excluded. A thunderstorm on the horizon. Dark clouds, sexual overtones foreshadowing the third movement. Tease 'em, make 'em wait. He felt aroused, and he was certain Janine Kennedy did too. They were in the gazebo at Lakeside Park, sitting on the swing, waiting for her train. Wearing nothing under her choir robe. Another tap at his shoulder. Who? One minute, please. Unzipping her robe as the rain began to fall. The train pulling away without her. The zipper stuck. He felt the headphones torn off his head, but he kept playing, almost finished: willow trees bending in the gale force winds, F sharp minor to B flat ninth, Janine laughing at the absurdity of it, E minor, D ninth, C major ninth, windows slamming shut in the rain all over town, bakery workers standing in the doorway smoking cigarettes, thunder-struck dogs whimpering to be let in the back door of the bakery and a flash of lightning behind Janine igniting the luminous curve of her heaving breast as he touched her and then. . . .

Silence.

Stanley opened his eyes to see Lowell Coleman standing with the synthesizer's plug in his hand. Pastor Leo and Mrs. LaVoie stood to either side, Janine next to them. He looked in the rearview mirror. The entire congregation was standing, gazing up to the balcony. He changed his angle of vision and tried to look into his own eyes, but found instead the angry racoon eyes of his mother.

"What is it, Stanley?" Pastor Leo asked.

"You heard it?" Stanley said. "Wasn't it beautiful?"

Then the world fragmented, and he momentarily thought perhaps he'd fainted, or died, or simply found a delicious way of reorganizing the puzzle of sensory experience. *Godawful screeching, someone said. Like a banshee's caterwauling. Sacrilege. Give him room—he needs air—Lowell, loosen his tie. Stanley?* He hit his head when he slumped to the floor, but he heard voices. *He looks terrible. The poor boy hasn't eaten in days, I'll bet. He looks like he hasn't slept in weeks. It's not like he had an ego problem—it's not like he had an ego, actually. Remember when he almost lit the Christmas tree on fire? He always was a little daft. It's good his mother wasn't here to see this. He cracked up. Lost it. Too many years of living alone—some people handle it fine, others don't. He never married, you know. Time passed. Time was fluid, but blank, and silent. Ladies and gentlemen, we're told Stanley is going to be alright, after some rest, just a little exhaustion . . . but meanwhile Janine Kennedy and I have an announcement to make. . . . Stanley? It was the heat. It must have been over a hundred up in the balcony, wouldn't you say, Janine? I shouldn't have written that note—it put too much pressure on him. Stanley?* He disengaged. *I read that those synthesizer things give off vibrations, like the microwave fields from powerlines that've been rotting the lips off cows. Personally, I never saw so many double rainbows until they started shooting rockets into space. It just means some things should be left well enough alone. Maybe he should be left alone too. He always was a loner. A strange one. Stanley?* He went home, but the fragmentation persisted. *Would pastoral counseling on this matter be of any use to you? Sometimes the feelings we have for other people can confuse us. . . . You're sure? The meeting is called. . . . We're sorry Stanley, but Mrs. Hanson feels that having Dorothy continue her lessons might be too much for you to handle right now. The meeting is called. . . . You work too hard, Stanley. Eight hours a day and a good breakfast. You need someone to look after you. What was it, Stanley? Can you say? Were you upset about something?*

Whispers are louder than shouts in a small town.

*Maybe he was possessed—stranger things have happened. The music comes before the meanings assigned it.*

“I’m sorry,” he heard himself saying, “but I wasn’t thinking about anything. I forgot where I was.”

*The music comes before. . . .*

“There was too much music. I couldn’t stop it, even in my dreams.”

Stanley?

“The meeting is called to order. The motion before the organ committee is that First Emmanuel borrow \$6,253.06, bringing the restoration fund to an even twenty thousand dollars, and then have the Fulton organ we’ve enjoyed these many years repaired. All in favor say aye.”

“Aye.”

“Stanley?”

“Aye.”

“The motion is carried unanimously.”

6.

Stanley rested. Exhaustion was the final diagnosis, malnutrition and dehydration, accompanied by stress. A nicer way to say “nervous breakdown.” Dr. Katz wrote Stanley out a prescription for valium and suggested he take a long drive somewhere. Stanley decided not to fill the prescription. Pastor Leo told the congregation Stanley’s only flaw was that he took his job too seriously. Once the Fulton was repaired, the physician’s wife was hired as a provisional replacement while Stanley recuperated. According to everyone, the doctor’s wife’s playing was beautiful, so Stanley needn’t worry himself—First Emmanuel was in good hands.

Stanley wanted only for everything to get back to normal. He couldn’t remember the song he’d been playing, and didn’t try to. He apologized to the congregation, to everyone. Hopefully that was that. People would talk, of course, but there was nothing he could do about that. He still had his students, most of them, and his salary from the school, and his expenses were minimal, the mortgage on the house paid off long ago. When Janine and Lowell stopped by to see how he was doing (a large diamond on her left hand) he said he was fine, not to worry.

“Three squares and eight hours of sleep, no matter what,” Lowell Coleman told him. “Three and eight and you can get through anything.”

Soon Stanley could almost believe it really was a case of exhaustion, because he'd hardly slept or eaten the week he'd fallen apart. Maybe he was just prone to doing stupid things every once in a while. Once he felt himself again, he could almost believe he was back to normal . . . if it weren't for a feeling he couldn't quite shake, nothing he could put his finger on, that something was still . . . different. It was silly, but everything felt so fragile, as if the courthouse walls were no thicker than paper, and the river that cut through town were only half an inch deep, and the clouds were only painted on the sky. A funny feeling that he couldn't shake. He'd look at the horizon and almost expect something to suddenly pop up, like a child hiding behind a couch. Every time he opened a drawer or a cupboard door, he expected to be surprised. It was an odd feeling, but not an unpleasant one, maybe something like *déjà vu*.

He was lying in bed, on a warm September night, thinking about this funny feeling that had come over him and wouldn't go away, wondering if he should mention it to Dr. Katz, when he heard what sounded like a bird stuck in the attic. It happened every once in a while, though he was never sure exactly how they got in. Or it could have been a bat too—that had happened once. He took a flashlight and a rolled up newspaper and went up to investigate. It was dank and dusty in the attic, a smell that hadn't changed from when he was a boy. When he got to the source of the sound, instead of a bird he discovered a clarinet, playing all by itself in a basket of letters, or rather, the sound of a clarinet. How odd that the sound of a clarinet should be coming from a basket of letters, and no clarinet. He picked up the basket and shook the letters out, but the clarinet sound ran and hid in a clothing storage bag. The screen window was open, and in the branches of the tree beyond it an owl was playing a viola while singing an aria about compassion for mice: *Oh-that-the-mouse-should-fall-before-mine-light-gath'ring-eyes, for-sharp-they-are-and-sharper-still-my-talons. . . .*

Stanley went back to bed, but the sounds followed him. *Hath-not-the-mouse-a-family-much-beloved. . . .* The air conditioner was beating a tattoo on a set of conga drums, and when Stanley squinted out the window at the street lamp, a resounding C sharp minor filled the night. *The-night-is-mine, and-so-I-reign-within-it, mute-wings-ope'ed. . . .* When he looked up, he could

hear the moon blowing like a foghorn, the stars whistling, while somewhere far away a freight train drew a rosined bow across taut steel strings.

He went into the bathroom and peed and splashed water on his face. When he flushed the toilet, he heard a chorus of bass voices: *I must go down, I must go down, around and 'round to the sea!*

He pulled on a pair of pants and threw a sweater over his pajama tops and slipped into a pair of loafers, which squeaked like a porch swing. *Now-shall-I-lift-my-wings, the-moon-o'er-head.* . . . In the living room, he opened the desk drawer and found the card he was looking for: *Bart Jerome—Keyboards and Soundware—Musical Instruments Bought and Sold—New and Used.* He dialed the number there.

“Hello?” a sleepy voice on the other end said.

“I’d like to speak to B.J.”

“You got him. Man, I hope this is about a gig. What time is it?”

“It’s about two.”

“Oh wow. It’s early. I didn’t know I’d fallen asleep. Anyway, yeah man, how can I do you?”

“This is Stanley Knuteson, from Onagle,” Stanley said. “We were trying out a synthesizer you had, a while back.”

“Yeah yeah, the SPXL. Sorry that didn’t work out.”

“You once said you thought the Appleton organ I have in my home is worth fifteen thousand dollars. The Pfeifer sells for eleven thousand, am I right?”

“Well, uh . . . yeah. And change. I could let it go for under twelve, definitely.”

“I wanted to know if you’d be willing to take the Appleton in trade. You’d be getting a good deal, and it’s in mint condition.” He heard a huffing sound behind him. He turned, to see the urn on the fireplace mantel. It was making deep barking noises. “Just a minute.”

Stanley went to the mantel, took the gold medallion from its frame, and the red silk sash, and the black velvet mounting material, rolled it all up into a ball, and stuffed the material into the wind way of the pipe’s flue, silencing it with a gag.

He returned to the phone.

“So,” he asked, “what do you think?”

“Yeah,” Bart Jerome said. “I think I could do something like that. I’d have to make some calls about taking it out of there.”

“So we have a deal?”

“Sure man. *Que sera*. You liked it, huh?”

“I liked it.”

Stanley drove to Janine Kennedy’s rented farmhouse, two miles out of town on the road to Goodhue, where he saw her Tercel in the driveway. Lowell Coleman’s car was nowhere to be seen, so Stanley felt free to pick up the lids of two garbage pails and clang them together like cymbals as he stood on the front lawn in the moonlight. When her bedroom light came on, he sang.

“Dream-of-me, dream-of-love, dream-of-a-love-song, that-I-have-found, and-I-love-you, oh-yes-I-love-you, and-I-will-tell-you, when-you-are-in-my-arms-again. . . .”

Janine came out onto the porch in her bathrobe.

“Stanley, what are you doing? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he sang. He clanged the lids together again. He liked the sound they made. The colors were even better. “How are you?”

“It’s two in the morning.”

“Two-thirty. I couldn’t wait.”

“You couldn’t wait for what?”

“Do you love Lowell Coleman, or did you just get engaged to him because you didn’t think anybody else would come along? Because I’m here and I’d like to marry you too. I know people think I’m boring, but I just thought you should know that people can change. And I know you like me, and I was thinking I could grow on you even more now that things have changed. So what do you think?”

“What do I think? Are you sane, Stanley?”

“Why? Is that good?”

“More or less.”

“Well, yeah. *Que sera*. I’m sane. For the most part. Probably.”

“Don’t fool with me, Stanley,” she said. She held her robe closed at the throat. “I’ve been trying to get you interested in me for years. I always knew you had a side to you. . . .”

“You did?”

“And then just when I thought you were interested in me . . . you didn’t call. That hurt a lot, Stanley. Lowell is. . . . For Pete’s sake, Stanley. We’re engaged.”

“So?”



“What do you mean, so?”

“So be engaged to me too. That’s not illegal. It’s only bigamy if you marry two people.”

“Stanley. . . .”

“I have a lot to offer, Janine. You could be with me.”

“And then what?”

“Well,” Stanley said. “It will probably be weird. But it will be wonderful too.”

“How will it be wonderful?”

An owl flew overhead with a mouse riding on his back. They were singing *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* in two-part harmony.

Stanley stepped back. He looked up in the sky, where a nation of stars shone down on them. He saw the moonlight reflected in the calm waters of the Turtle River. The trees swayed in the breeze like dancers, and all around them cornfields rolled like the sea from horizon to horizon. Stanley held his arms out from his sides.

“Can’t you hear any of this?” he asked.

“I hear crickets,” Janine said. “And maybe a bird.”

“There’s more,” he said. “And if I have to—if you let me—I’ll spend the rest of my life describing it for you. And playing it for you. And one day you’ll hear it too. That’s how it will be wonderful, Janine.”

She cinched her bathrobe tighter at the waist.

“Why don’t you come in, and we’ll discuss it?” she said. “You can’t stand out here all night.” He smiled. “Actually, you probably could, but why don’t you come inside anyway?”

Some time later, the lights went out in the farmhouse, but the music continued to play.

The incomplete works of Stanley Knuteson.

Unfinished symphonies, still in progress.