

Julius Geissler

Sena Jeter Callaghan

The New York reviews were very favorable. Most of them claimed again that a new height had been reached in musical performance. Julius showed the reviews to Stanley at the hotel breakfast table.

"This is exactly what they said about Jean-Paul and me twenty years ago," he said, displeased. "You and I are completely different from Jean-Paul and me." He handed Stanley the *Times* and read through others.

"Now," he said, "here is one that describes you as a 'cadaverous young accompanist.' At least he can see, if he cannot hear." Julius chuckled at his cleverness and began to chomp his bacon. Alex was pleased with the description, too. Hadn't he said that Stanley was no ornament? Stanley did not mind whatever Julius said, but Alex was only their manager, and Stanley treated him coolly.

Julius looked up from his paper: "Is it true that you are only twenty-two?"

"Yes," Stanley said.

"You don't seem so young," Julius said.

"It's because you listen to my playing and don't look at me," Stanley said. He knew that that would flatter Julius. He wanted Julius to be in a good mood while he read the rest of that review. Stanley had already read all the papers; he had even read them before Alex.

"Listen to this," Julius read, "'such a young pianist should not spend his best years as an accompanist'"

Stanley laughed, "I have plenty of time; don't feel guilty, Julius."

"Guilty!" Julius flushed and quivered slightly. "If it had not been for my knocking at the door, you would still be playing mazurkas in Gagliano's madhouse."

Stanley said, "Of course."

"Your contract is for six years," Alex said quietly. Both Julius and Stanley thought he was rude to say that.

This story is part of a novel in progress.

"And in six years I shall retire," Julius added. He felt more calm now. "And I myself will say all kinds of lovely things about you."

"Maybe you will go then and teach violin at Gagliano's little school," Alex said. Alex knew that as many times as Gagliano had made the offer, Julius had firmly refused. Alex was glad because he did not want to live close to Gagliano. Gagliano had married Lotte, Julius' sister, whom Alex had loved very much. At one time Alex had thought Julius had arranged the marriage, but he had forgotten it or forgiven him years ago. He didn't know which; he didn't think of it anymore. Still he did not want to live close to Gagliano. But he knew that he would have to live wherever Julius did. He could not imagine their parting after so many years. He subtly kept Julius from visiting Juilliard as much as he could.

"I will teach at Juilliard," Julius said, "if Gagliano will let me train pianists. I have not heard a good violin student for twenty years. They are impossible. But I have spent most of my life perfecting three pianists."

Stanley laughed. Julius was only playing at being the master, he thought. When they practiced together, Julius was perfectly courteous. He listened to the suggestions in the way Stanley played; he listened to anything that he said, too. Already Julius had changed his whole concept of Beethoven's *Spring Sonata*.

"You'll probably live as long and as well as Casals," Stanley said. He immediately knew that he should not have mentioned death to the two old men. It was true that Julius might live a long time but Alex looked sickly, Stanley thought. Stanley took off his pale glasses and rubbed them on his shirt front.

Alex said promptly, "Casals should have retired from playing the 'cello. No one should continue past his prime." He looked across the table at Stanley with disgust. His weak pink eyes were squinting without his glasses. He looked like a young chicken. Alex despised his youthfulness.

That evening Julius telephoned to Stanley's room. "Listen, Stanley," he said, "Alex is gone to bed. He is exhausted, but I can't sleep. I have a little creme sherry, also some beaujolais, champagne, light Rhine wine and madeira. Why don't you come and drink with me, and we will talk some."

Julius lit the fat candles and placed them around the living room of his suite. After the noon meal, when they finished discussing the reviews, he had begun to plan that he and Stanley should celebrate their first success together. Alex disapproved very much of his drinking so he had gotten a bellhop to buy the liquor, also the candles and some pastries. He would not eat the pastries; they were for Stanley only. He would do that much toward obeying Alex's diet plan.

He straightened the pastry plates and then straightened his lounging jacket. It was maroon silk, elegant and cool to touch. It was much like one that his grandfather had had in pre-war Germany, but he had been thin and he had had a large white moustache. Julius went to the window and pulled the blinds up. The city lights were beautiful, if a person liked that kind of view. They were on the nineteenth floor, he believed. Maybe Stanley liked it; he himself had gotten tired of it almost thirty years ago. He suddenly wished that he could see the mountains of Heidelberg again. He turned and walked across the thick carpet to the sofas. They sat at right angles with a square table joining their corners. On the table he had placed all the bottles and one of the candles. Two more candles sat on

the grand piano with plates under them. He lighted some of the candles, and they reflected in the windows, flickering across the outline of the city and obscuring it. Then the old violinist lay down on one of the sofas, and for five minutes, he dreamed.

He and Alex had walked down Michigan Boulevard from the Hilton to the lions in front of the Art Institute. They climbed up on the lions, and then the lions began to bob like merry-go-round animals. They rode the lions through the sky back half a century to Heidelberg. Then Alex's lion had ridden him away and only Julius was left in his grand practice room in his father's house.

Julius was thirteen, and holding his violin and bow in one hand, with the other, he had thrown the metronome out the window. The little wooden time machine caught at an angle in one of the lilac bushes, and the weighted pendulum hung out like a stiff metal tongue. Julius strode across the large beautiful room which his father had designated as just for him and his music. He was master of the room again; he had thrown out that insulting little monster with its rude tock-tock-tock. He walked to a large mirror and did something that he had never done before. He tucked the violin under his chin and watched himself play. Almost at once he was surprised. He could scarcely believe in the agility of his fingers; he could not feel responsible for their beauty, their facility. They ran on the fingerboard like the legs of a little horse. He had called his sister—*Lotte! Lotte! Look, look at my left hand.* She had run into the room, her long braids swinging down to her waist—*What's the matter, Julius,* she had said. *Watch! Watch!* He played again, exactly the same passage. Yes, it looked just the same. He became so excited that he began to tremble. He stopped playing and shouted, *It's fantastic!* He held his left hand up before his face, spreading the fingers. Lotte solemnly said, *It is just the same as always, Julius. Really?* he had said, and she had said *just the same.* He asked *Isn't it fantastic?* She picked up one of her braids and gently brushed the fine hairs on her forearm. She looked up with her lime-green eyes and said, *No, Julius, it is just the same way all violinists look.* He could scarcely believe it. She added, *Haven't you ever seen yourself do it before?* *No,* he had answered, without shame at his self-wonder. *I never saw it before.* She began to walk away. She was going to take a stroll in the park with nurse. *It's like I don't control it,* he had added, to explain. But she was leaving, and soon he began to practice again. He played all his pieces, watching his fingers and his working bow, watching, sometimes, his eyes or mouth.

Julius went back in his dream to the part when Lotte said, *It is just the same as always, Julius.* She said it over and over, picking up her braid and dusting her arm.

Finally, Julius had grown tired of watching himself, but he did not go on to that part in his dream. Actually, he had begun to feel vain and unworthy. Never again did he watch his own hand running on the fingerboard, his bow arm opening at the elbow, though it was true that sometimes he had seen himself reflected in french doors or in windows when it was dark outside. Sometimes from a highly polished piece of furniture or from the glass over a picture.

But he had not repeated that exhibition.

Lotte smiled and blew him a kiss. *It is just the same as always, Julius.* A sort

of tock-tock began to hammer gently over Lotte's words. It was erratic, as though a metronome were running down. All at once Julius was awake, and he realized that someone was timidly knocking.

Julius sat up. The light was too dim. He did not want Stanley to think that he was a seducer of young boys. He lighted all the fat candles. Now he had plenty of light, but the suite still seemed a little exotic, as it should. Stanley would want to tell his grandchildren about the night after his first concert with the legendary Julius Geissler.

Stanley knocked again, softly.

Julius shook hands with him at the door, with more warmth and true formality than he usually shook hands. Over Julius' head Stanley saw the candlelit room and the array of liquor, and he immediately smiled and said, "Ah, this is very nice."

"Yes, come and sit on the sofa. Prop your feet up on one of those hassocks and I will pour you a drink." Stanley had worn his tweed sport coat; he pitched it on the sofa and then threw himself down beside it. He kicked off his shoes and stretched his toes. He flopped his back against the sofa and placed his feet on a blond leather hassock.

"What would you like?" Julius asked in a stately fashion.

"Champagne," he answered. The candlelight flickered on Julius' hands as he lifted the bottle from the ice cradle. Stanley noticed that he wore a large emerald ring which he had never seen before. Julius poured himself some Rhine wine, then he held up his glass and said, "May we have many more good concerts and good friendship, too."

"Amen," Stanley said with a grin.

"Well, are you religious?" Julius said lightly. He settled back into the sofa and glanced out at the city. "I had not noticed it."

"Not at all," Stanley answered. "In the South in church, people in the congregation say *Amen* whenever they like what the preacher says."

"What church is this?" Julius said.

"The Baptist church," Stanley answered.

"Your parents were members?"

"Yes."

"Ah, I see," Julius said. He smiled. "Sons always follow their parents' wishes a little, don't they? Are both your parents from Georgia?" he asked.

"Yes," Stanley said. He tipped back half the glass of champagne. Some indistinct remembrance of their disapproval of drinking began to excite him. He felt much younger than he was.

"My father was German, of course," Julius said, "but my mother was Italian. Did you know that?"

"No," Stanley answered. Julius drank his wine and poured some more.

"Yes, she was born in Florence. I still have some cousins, I mean the children of some cousins, living in Florence." Suddenly he looked at Stanley with new insight. "You know, they are about your age. How old are you? Thirty?"

"No, twenty-two," Stanley murmured. He liked the champagne very much.

"Oh, yes, they told me that before," Julius said. "I had forgotten." They were

silent for a few moments. The candles burned steadily, and Stanley's usual paleness seemed somewhat more healthy.

Finally Stanley said, "Did you and Alex visit them last fall?"

"Who?" Julius said.

"The cousins in Florence."

"Yes, but they never really knew us. It was their parents who were our friends."

"I see," Stanley said. Then they were quiet again. "Is Alex all right?" Stanley asked.

"He's just tired, that's all." Julius said. "I am a little tired, too, but I wanted us to have this night together." Julius spoke with simplicity and kindness.

Stanley humbly said, "That's good of you, Julius."

"Something to tell your grandchildren," he said. He had not meant to say that. But he really did want Stanley to tell his grandchildren about old Geissler, and, because of the wine, his wish had slipped out.

"When did you first believe that you would be really great?" Stanley suddenly asked. It sounded like a reporter's question, and Stanley felt ashamed, but Julius didn't seem to mind. He drank some more of the Rhine wine and then laid his huge head back on the edge of the sofa.

"I learned to play the violin when I was seven," he said. "My father did not beat me, like Beethoven's father. I used to wish that he would. I thought that it would guarantee that I would be great. But he did not. He was a very gentle, loving man, much like Lotte, my sister. I learned to play with love. That is why people like to play with me. That's why you like it." He paused. Stanley felt a little embarrassed that Julius knew this so well.

"You do like it, don't you?" Julius said. He raised his head from the sofa back and looked at Stanley. His young friend was too slender. He looked almost like a skeleton draped over the sofa, with his feet propped up on the hassock for a joke.

"Yes, I do," Stanley said, "very much."

"I am a better person playing than any other time. . . ." Julius did not ask Stanley to agree with that. He knew it was true, and long ago he had quit worrying about the discord of his two selves. He grew quiet, but Stanley could not let silence come after such a statement. He was a little frightened by the weight of years that lay under Julius' words. Stanley had heard all about the eternal nature of Art, which he suddenly thought of now. Nothing could be more transient or human than music, though. That seemed to be what the fat old master was saying, something about how human he was and that he would like to play forever.

"So even when you were a child you knew that you were good," Stanley said.

"All children with a little talent think they can be great," Julius said. "I did not really know until I was seventeen." They both drank again. Julius began to rub his cheeks and head with his chunky hands. The emerald ring glittered in the candlelight.

"The glare from the city is hurting my eyes," Julius said. "If you have seen the view enough, I'll close the blinds."

"Of course," Stanley said. Actually he did not want Julius to move. He had grown at ease; he understood the tone of their celebration and he did not want it

to be modulated by even a change in posture. When the blinds closed, he felt deprived of the scene, too.

But when Julius turned from the windows he said, "You should see the mountains of Heidelberg some time," and Stanley immediately became re-oriented.

"For next year we will ask Alex to arrange a little tour of Europe for us. Would you like that?" Julius crossed the room and poured himself some more Rhine wine before he sat down. "These modern sofas are too low," he remarked as he lowered himself cautiously.

"I've never been to Europe."

"Ah, then we will certainly go." They both felt glowing inside like the room. "Tell me," Julius said, as he raised his feet onto a black leather hassock, "where would you like to go?"

"London, Paris, Rome. . . ." Stanley said.

"They are fine, but you must not forget the smaller places, too. Florence and Heidelberg!" Julius smacked his lips once over the top of his wine glass.

Stanley laughed uproariously, "Heidelberg and Florence! Of course!" he said. Suddenly Julius realized that the young man was a little drunk. Julius laughed loudly, with great compassion. He raised his glass.

"To Heidelberg and Florence and all the little cousins who would not care if God himself came to visit."

They laughed and drank.

"These cousins have children though," Julius went on. "I mean the children of the children of the cousins. Maybe they will like you. They don't like me because I speak Italian with a German accent."

Stanley shrieked with laughter. "I don't speak Italian at all!"

Julius chuckled, "But you are about the same age—seventeen, eighteen, young teen-agers."

"No, I am forty-two," Stanley said. They both laughed with great gusto. Julius began to cough a little.

"Well, someday you must learn Italian. I will teach you so you will sound just like me. My mother was Italian, you know."

"Yes," Stanley said, "my parents are from Georgia."

"Ah, I remember," Julius said. "But I learned Italian with a German accent anyway. Listen, I would probably be dead if my mother had not been Italian. My father, he loved me so much, sent Lotte and me to Florence when I was fifteen. When I was seventeen, in 1914, the War began. They would have made a soldier out of me in Germany."

"That was when you knew you were a great violinist," Stanley said.

"Heh?" Julius answered.

"When you were seventeen, you first knew that you really had it."

"Yes, but it was not because of the War," Julius answered. "Maybe the War had something to do with it, but we were all drinking at my cousins' house in Florence. We did not go to taverns to disgrace ourselves. We drank at home in their huge living room, even the girls, Lotte and all the others. Lotte was only fourteen but already very beautiful, like a woman. Alex was there, too. He had just barely gotten out of Germany."

Julius stretched himself; he lifted his feet and re-settled himself. He rubbed the slippery silk sleeves of his jacket. His hands had gotten damp in the palms.

"There were twenty or twenty-five of us young people—German, Italians, a few French and a beautiful young man, an Egyptian, whom I had never met before. Jean-Paul looked a little like that Egyptian, though Jean-Paul was not really handsome. He was sick with his stomach for years, and his expression was consequently not pleasant. But he had a very fine sense of humor. . . ."

Julius thought again about Jean-Paul. How many nights they had talked much and drank a little. Not like tonight with too much liquor and not enough talk. Jean-Paul had been only twelve years younger than he; old Fritz had been fifteen years older. Only Alex was really his contemporary. Suddenly a vision of the thousands, hundreds of thousands, who had applauded him and Jean-Paul shook his mind and ran down his veins like a drum roll. His torso trembled a little. He sipped his wine.

Julius and Alex had been the chief mourners. They had cancelled the autumn concert series in the States and had gone instead to Italy. They even took a trip to Pointier and met Jean-Paul's mother whom he had left very well off. All three of them had sat in a large sullen room and listened to an early recording that Jean-Paul had made of the *Hammerclavier* before he had met Julius. Hearing Jean-Paul play alone made Julius feel lonely. Too, the interpretation had a sort of intensity that he had never even heard at all in Jean-Paul's playing. His mother said that he had been only twenty-two when he made the recording and everyone had thought that he would be the soloist of the century. She had been very proud of him, even if he had turned out only to be an accompanist. She told Julius that she had always admired his violin playing. They spoke English, which she did with great stiffness.

Jean-Paul had been killed in Cleveland. In the last image that Julius had of him, Jean-Paul was combing his thick, straight hair back from his forehead. He had had on a dark suit and looked a little ill and yellowish. That morning he had talked of retiring and about his stomach as usual, Julius remembered. When he started to cross the street, he was run over by a bus. It was in Cleveland.

Julius sipped his wine again and felt better.

Stanley reached for the champagne. "Was it a good party?"

"Well, it was all right." Julius turned and looked at his young friend again. The candle had burned down, and it was no longer tall enough to light Stanley well. Julius pushed the light closer to Stanley and his skin came back alive. "But not so good as this party," he said politely to Stanley. Julius felt immediately that his tongue had been too fast to compare them. They were not at all alike. He was not sorry that Stanley asked to hear more about it.

"Well, I was only seventeen, and I was drinking very much, and we all were, especially Lotte. . . ." Julius' mood changed; he didn't want to tell it after all.

"Did you sing?" Stanley seemed to hear singing. He knew that it was the liquor in his ears. He slid down more on the sofa, and let his head rest against the back. Suddenly he felt the fatigue rush out of his body. He felt warm and sleepy.

"Oh yes, we sang," Julius said. "Germans have beautiful voices. It is a legend

but it is true, even me. We were singing and dancing and talking some about the War. The Italians there already condemned Germany. They were making us condemn Germany too, but I didn't mind because I was against the War. But the Germans began to compare Germany and Italy in culture. Of course we had Goethe and Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. They could not touch Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. Well, we drank more and sang more. There was a piano and nearly everyone played something while we sang. There was one loud, boisterous girl who kept daring Lotte to take her clothes off. At first it stayed just among the girls but eventually all the men heard the dare too, one by one. Lotte was very full in the bosom and, you see, this girl thought that she was stuffed. I was so drunk when I heard it that first I was furious and then I forgot it. Then everybody started daring everyone else to do things. Somebody drank a large glass of whiskey without stopping; somebody else held a high note very long. It was all very foolish and fun. Then somebody—an Italian—dared me to play the Tartini Sonata in G Minor. Do you know it?"

"G Minor," Stanley mumbled.

"It's called the 'Devil's Trill.'"

"No. . . ."

"Somebody said that it would be enough to dare me to play it sober. Not even the Devil had been drunk when he played it."

Stanley half opened his eyes; the candles were still burning; they floated around in the room while he blinked his eyes. He knew that he was very drunk and drifting somewhere above fatigue, but he felt sure that the figure on his right was Julius—he could not move his head—and that he was talking about the Devil.

"I'm not religious," Stanley said.

Julius chuckled softly, "No, but you are a little tired, aren't you, old fellow?"

"What about the Devil?" Stanley said.

"He came to Tartini in a dream. He stood at the foot of his bed and played the sonata on a violin. When Tartini woke up he wrote it, but he couldn't remember it perfectly. It's a piece full of very difficult trills. The violinist trills with some fingers and plays the melody with others at the same time. Tartini was famous for his ability to play trills, and so he makes them as diabolic as possible. He was a great violinist as well as a composer. But the piano part is easy."

"Hmmm. . . ."

"So this Italian was putting Tartini's devil on me because I had shoved Bach, Beethoven and Brahms down his throat. There is no music like German music." Julius pounded the sofa twice and then his hand lay tired and relaxed on the upholstery.

"But Lotte jumped up and said of course I could do it. She knew that I had practiced it some. And she ran upstairs and got the music and my violin. The young Egyptian said that he could play the piano part. I was not surprised, the piano part is nothing.

"I began to feel very hot, and somebody started throwing logs on the fire. Everybody's face was glowing; we all had apple cheeks and very good color. Rossini threw chemicals in the fire. He started shouting 'Play, devil, play' and

dancing around, and the others did too, and the fire was burning green and purple and red.

"So we began, and only then did I know what the drinking had done to my hands. Still all their faces were smiling and beaming at me, Lotte too, with great excitement. Their faces got on the page and mixed with the notes, and I didn't know if I could go on. Then my eye caught the Egyptian's head. I noticed the way his lips sat on his face and that his skin looked very smooth. He was doing all right, and suddenly I was doing all right. I didn't see the others or Lotte anymore, only that Sphinx-like Egyptian. When I came to the first trills, they went very well, and everybody applauded. This made me a little excited again. I could feel the water drip down my ribs, but when I got to the next trills I was calm again and they were even better. There was no applause that time, and I had forgotten about being drunk. Before the beginning of the cadenza in the coda I looked at the Egyptian. He was very aloof; he seemed miles away. I am sure that if he had looked at me then I would have collapsed, but he looked at the music, already counting the measures so that he would come back in correctly. So I began, seeing him over the top of the page. My fingers"—Julius clasped his hands together trying to find the words—"they were wonderful, like devil-dancers, like hummingbirds beating over the strings. It was very good. The Egyptian came in for the last chords, then they shouted and applauded and handed me two steins of beer. I was panting and suddenly very drunk again. And I was ecstatic with triumph. I grabbed a stein and drank it up and then started the other. Then, suddenly, everyone was quiet and then they were all shouting *Bravo! Wonderful! Fantastic!* and I lowered the stein and looked around and Lotte was standing behind me completely naked."

The old German was quiet for a moment, and the image of his young sister rose again in his mind.

"She was so beautiful, especially her breasts which were so large, tilted up, and her waist was slender and her belly flat and her hair. . . . I was stunned. I was quiet for a moment, like they had been. And then I felt the tears so hot coming down my face, and I turned and ran away in shame. I ran high up in the house to my room and sobbed and sobbed into the bed and finally fell asleep.

"Everybody in the house always had breakfast together, and that was the first I saw of Lotte. In front of everyone she said that I should not have left the party so soon, that Alex had lent her his long coat-sweater, and she had been very comfortable the rest of the night. We never spoke of it anymore."

Julius turned his body and reached again for the wine bottle. Then he saw that Stanley was asleep.

He rocked back into his seat without taking the bottle; he rested his head on the soft back of the sofa and once again imagined how he had turned, the half-full stein in one hand, his violin and bow hanging from the other and—Lotte.

Julius slowly got up from the low sofa. He looked at Stanley whose large boney hands lay palm up and slightly curved on each side of his sleeping body. Julius thought *the shame of one generation sends another to sleep*. Then he thought that nothing was as coherent as that. He picked up Stanley's sport coat

and spread it over his legs and feet. *He is very tired*, Julius thought, and this seemed simple and true to him. He took off his silk maroon coat and laid it across Stanley's skinny chest, tucking it under his shoulders. Then he cleared away the liquor bottles and carried them into his bedroom. He did not want Stanley to see the bottles when the morning sunlight woke him up. Finally Julius walked around the room from one hazy pool of light to the next, blowing out the candles. Just before he blew out the light next to Stanley he noticed his downy yellow hair. While his breath was puffing out the light, it seemed to change to hoar.