

HOW MUSIC BEGINS

by James Van Pelt

James Van Pelt's short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including Asimov's, Analog, Talebones, and Realms of Fantasy. The author's recently released novel, Summer of the Apocalypse (Fairwood Press), is a finalist for the Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award. You can find his website at sff.people/james.van.pelt and blog at jimvanpelt.livejournal.com. James teaches English at Fruita-Monument High School and Mesa State College in western Colorado. His vivid new story deftly shows us...

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Hands raised, ready for the downbeat, Cowdrey brought the band to attention. He took a good inhalation for them to see, thinking, "The band that breathes together, plays together." Players watched over their music stands as he tapped out a barely perceptible four beats. Then, he dropped into the opening notes of "The King's Feast," a simple piece a ninth grade band might play at the season's first concert. But Elise Morgan, his best student, had composed variations for flutes and clarinets, added an oboe solo, and changed the arrangement for the cornets and trombones, so now new tonal qualities arose. Her neatly hand-written revisions crowded his score, a black and white representation of the opening chords, the musical lines blending effortlessly. Everyone on beat. Everyone on tune. At the state competition, they would sweep the awards, but this wasn't state, and they weren't really a junior-high band anymore.

Eyes closed, he counted through the bars. "The King's Feast" recreated a night at Henry VIII's court. Suitably serious. A heavy drum background carrying the load. Not quite a march, but upbeat in a dignified way. Someone in the French horn section sounded a bit pitchy. Was it Thomas? Cowdrey cocked his head to isolate it, but the individual sound faded, lost in the transition to the second movement.

He lived for this moment, when the sections threaded together, when the percussion didn't overwhelm or the brass blow out the woodwinds. He smiled as he directed them through the tricky exit from the solo. His eyes open now, their eyes on him, young faces, raggedy-cut hair, shirts and blouses too small, everyone's pants inches short above their bare feet, he led them to the conclusion, slowing the saxophones down—they wanted to rush to the end—then he brought the flutes up.

Rhythm and harmony tumbled over the pomp and circumstance in Henry's court. The ladies' elegant dress. The courtiers waiting in the wings. The king himself, presiding from the throne, all painted in music. Cowdrey imagined brocade, heavy skirts, royal colors, swirling in the dance.

The last notes trembled, and he held them in hand, not letting them end until his fist's final clasp cut them off. He was the director.

Aching silence. Someone in the drum section coughed. Cowdrey waited for the lights to flicker. They had flickered after the band's first performance here, and they'd flickered again after a near perfect "Prelude and Fugue in B Flat" six months ago. Tonight, though, the lights stayed steady. Behind the band, the long curved wall and the window that circled the room holding back the brown smoke on the other side were the only audience. "The King's Feast" concluded the night's performance. Cowdrey signaled the players to their feet. Instruments clanked. Sheet music rustled. He turned from the band to face the other side's enigmatic window and impenetrable haze. Playing here was like playing within a fish bowl, and not just the shape either. He bowed, and the band bowed behind him. Whatever watched, if anything, remained hidden in the roiling cloud.

"Good performance, Cougars. Leave your music on the stands for the section leaders to pick up, then you may go to dinner. Don't forget, breathing practice before breakfast with your ensembles."

Chatting, the kids headed toward the storage lockers to replace their instruments.

A clarinet player waved as she left the room. "Good night, Mr. Cowdrey."

He nodded in her direction.

"Night, sir," said a percussionist. "See you in the morning. Good performance."

The room cleared until Elise Morgan remained, jotting post-concert notes on her clipboard. Her straight black hair reached the bottom of her ears, and her glasses, missing one earpiece, sat crookedly on her nose. As always, dark smudges sagged under her eyes. She slept little. More often than not, late at night, she'd still be working on the music. "One of the French horns came in late again. I think it's Thomas. He's waiting until the trombones start, and it throws him a half beat off."

“I didn’t notice.” Cowdrey sat beside her. The light metal chair creaked under his weight. Several chairs had broken in the last few months. Just two spares remained. He wondered what would happen when players had to stand for their performances. “The band sounded smooth tonight. Very confident.”

Elise nodded toward the window. “They’re tuning the room. Maybe they’re getting it ready for Friday’s concert.”

Cowdrey raised his eyebrows.

Elise pointed to the domed ceiling. “See there and there. New baffles. We’ve lost the echo-chamber effect you mentioned last week, and check out my flute.” She handed it to him. “At first, they just repadded them. Normal maintenance, but they’ve done other stuff too. It’s a better instrument.”

He held the flute, then tried a few fingerings. The keys sank smoothly. No stickiness, and the flute weighed heavy.

“Play a note,” she said.

He brought the instrument to his lips, but even before he blew, he knew it was extraordinary.

“During the sixth grade, after I won state solos the second time, my parents took me to the New York Philharmonic. I met their first chair, and he let me play his flute. Custom made. Insured for \$50,000.” She took the instrument back from Cowdrey and rested it on her lap. “It wasn’t as good as this one is now. Maybe the Perfectionists are right.”

Cowdrey frowned. Misguided students with wacky theories about how they could get home shouldn’t be taken seriously.

“How’s that?” Cowdrey shook the irritation from his head. He thought he would check the lockers after he finished with Elise. Were the other instruments being upgraded too?

“Maybe what they want is a perfect performance, then they’ll let us go. Maybe Friday will be it.” She looked up at the nearest window. A brown smoky wave swirled behind it, cutting sight to no more than a yard or so beyond the glass.

Cowdrey felt fatherly. She sounded so wistful when she said, “they’ll

let us go.” He almost reached out to touch her arm, to offer comfort, but he held himself still. No sense in sending mixed signals. “I don’t know why we’re here. No one knows. They shouldn’t get their hopes up. After all, what’s a perfect performance?”

“Any sunset is perfect. Any pebble is perfect.” She scuffed her bare foot on the immaculate floor. “Weeds are perfect, and so is a parking lot at the mall when the cars are gone and you can ride your bike in all directions without hitting anything.” She sighed. “And open meadows where the grass is never cut.”

Cowdrey nodded, not sure how to respond. She often reminisced about meadows.

Elise closed her eyes dreamily. “I found a pebble in my band jacket. Sometimes I hold it and think about playgrounds.”

“Really?”

She looked up at him, then dug into her pocket. On her open palm, a bit of shiny feldspar the size of a pencil eraser caught the ceiling light. As quick as it came out, it vanished back into her pocket. She made another note on her clipboard. “The Perfectionists are getting pretty fanatical. Others heard Thomas come in late.”

“The band will maintain discipline. If anyone has a problem, they’ll talk to me. That’s why I’m here.”

Elise looked uncomfortable. “Are you sure? With Ms. Rhodes gone...”

Cowdrey glanced away from her to the empty chairs and music stands. “Ms. Rhodes will be missed, but the band can continue without an assistant director.”

“I’m just saying ... it’s a lot for a single adult to handle.”

He composed his face to meet her eyes. “The less we think of Ms. Rhodes, the better.”

Elise shrugged. “If you want it that way.”

“We have the section leaders. They have taken the responsibility.” He smiled. “Half the time I think the band doesn’t even need me. You all have

become such strong musicians.”

She wrote a last comment on her clipboard, then slipped it under her arm. “Not strong enough. Nowhere near. Today is Monday. If we don’t clean things up by Friday, the Perfectionists could get scary.”

“It’s late.” Without the rest of the band in the room, his voice sounded too loud and harsh. Truly, he could hear a pin drop with these acoustics. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Elise.”

“Have you thought any more about the wedding?”

“No. We’re not discussing it.”

Her lips pursed, as if she wanted to say something, but she put her finger to the bridge of her glasses to hold them in place, then stood. “I’ll direct breathing practice for the woodwinds in the morning, if you’ll take the brass. At least I can help that much.”

Cowdrey nodded. In the beginning, after the first week’s chaos settled down, Ms. Rhodes had led the woodwinds through their exercises. Rhodes, a somber thirty-year-old who wore padded-shoulder jackets and seldom smiled, would meet Cowdrey outside the practice rooms. He’d hand her the routine he’d written up the night before. She’d study it briefly, then follow the players. In the last few months, she’d spoken about band-related issues, but nothing else. Conversation stopped. He didn’t know how to broach another subject. The last time he’d tried, he had said, “How are you holding up?” She’d looked about like a wild bird for a second, as if she heard something frightful, but her face smoothed over and she said, “To improve rhythms, hone intonation, and create dynamic phrasing, we must improve breathing. All music begins with a good breath.” Red circled her exhausted eyes.

Lockers lined the hallway outside the performance hall. A cornet rested in its shaped space in the first one. Cowdrey took it out. It, too, had been improved. No longer an inexpensive junior high band instrument, the keys sank with ease; the horn glowed under the hallway’s indirect lighting, the metal as warm as flesh beneath his fingers.

He returned the horn to its place before closing the door. Thoughtfully, he walked to the T-intersection. To his left, the students’ rooms, their doors shut. To his right, the practice rooms, the cafeteria, and his own room. He trailed his knuckle against the wall, but as he turned to enter he noticed Ms. Rhodes’s door across the hall was gone as if it had

never existed in the unmarked wall. When did that happen? he thought.

As always, dinner and a water bottle waited in a box on his bed. For weeks after the band had arrived, the students had tried to catch the deliveries, but they never did. If students stayed in the room, the meals wouldn't come, so if they wanted to eat, they had to leave to practice or to perform.

Passable bread. Something that looked like bologna in the middle, but it tasted more like cheese. He washed it down with a couple of swallows. Only the water from the bottles was potable. The stuff from the showers smelled like vinegar and tasted bitter. He wondered about the pets he'd kept as a child, a lizard and two hamsters. Did the food ever taste right to them? Had he ever fed them what they needed or wanted? He rested the sandwich on his lap. Later, he looked down. His fingers had sunk into the bread, and the edges had grown crispy. He glanced at his watch. An hour had passed. Room check! He walked the long hall past the kids' doors. At first he'd insisted on making sure the right students went to the right rooms, as if they were on an overnight for weekend competition, as if they stayed at a Holiday Inn, but so often he woke kids who had already gone to sleep that now he just listened at each door. Were they quiet or crying? The first week there had been a lot of crying, and they had come close to not making it. Being a band saved them.

That week was his toughest trial. Fright. Fighting. Despair. To end it, he took the only step he knew: he called for a practice, and they became a band again.

Cowdrey trod softly from door to door, pausing, listening, and moving on.

He stopped for an extra long time outside Taylor Beau's room. Was Liz Waters in there with him? Were they in Liz's room? Cowdrey rested his hand on the doorknob. No way they could be serious about a marriage. They were children, junior high students, not adults; under astonishing circumstances, to be sure, but band standards and school regulations glued them together. For all his years as director, Cowdrey lived by one rule: would he be comfortable with the band's activities if parents or school board members watched? This marriage talk did not fit.

No sound beyond the closed door. His hand tightened on the knob; he didn't turn it. Did he want to know?

Next he paused outside Elise's door. She wouldn't be asleep. She'd

be looking over the day's notes, rewriting. Cowdrey shivered thinking about her brilliance. What must it have been like for Mozart's father when a three-year-old Amadeus picked out thirds and sixths on the harpsichord, when the father realized the son had surpassed him and would continue to grow beyond his comprehension and hope? But did Mozart eat and breathe music like Elise? Did he ever believe that music would take him home? Cowdrey didn't think so. Maybe at the end of Mozart's life, when the brain fevers wracked him, and he could feel death's hand on his neck. Maybe then he wrote with equal intensity.

Not many teachers ever had the chance to work with an Elise. If they did, they prayed they wouldn't ruin her vision, that they wouldn't poison her ear.

When he reached the hall's end, he turned and repeated the process back to his door. At first, he and Ms. Rhodes had done the room check together, then stood guard in the hall until the children quieted. After a few weeks, they had traded nights. Now, he patrolled alone. Perhaps Elise was right. Maybe it was too much for him to handle.

He sighed. The silent hall stretched before him. He felt his pulse in his arm where he leaned against the wall. Soon, his chin headed for his chest. Cowdrey jerked himself awake, walked the hallway's length two more times before admitting he had to go to bed. In wakefulness' last few seconds, head resting on the pillow, he imagined he heard doors opening, the stealthy pad of bare feet, and the hush of doors gently closing on clandestine liaisons. Could Taylor and Liz be a single case, or had he lost control? A tear crept down his cheek as consciousness flitted away.

In the morning, Elise met him in the hallway. "Here are the variations I told you about for the Beatles medley. Mostly I need the saxophones' sheets, but I also syncopated the drums for 'Eleanor Rigby,' and reworked the trombone bridge into 'Yellow Submarine,' so I'll need their music too."

Cowdrey nodded as he took the scores. "Did you sleep?"

Elise made a check mark on her clipboard. She moved to her next item. "I thought if we told the sections to treat their breathing exercises this morning like they were all preparing for a solo, we might get better sound from them. Remember, you told us once we should breathe from the diaphragm, and if we missed it, to miss big. I think about that a lot." She smiled, made another check, then frowned. "Also, you need to drop in on Thomas. I heard a rumor." Her pencil scratched paper firmly. "Look, Mr. Cowdrey, the band is on edge. All they think about is music and getting out.

To some, Thomas is a handicap. They need something else. A distraction.” She made another check on her list, then, without waiting for an answer, snapped the clipboard under her arm before striding toward the practice rooms, a girl on a mission.

“Good morning to you, too, Elise.”

Soon the hallway filled with sleepy kids. Cowdrey greeted them each in turn as they passed. Most smiled. He glanced at their eyes. The red-rimmed ones would be a worry, but they had been fewer and fewer as the weeks since their arrival turned into months. At first there had been nightmares, a reliving of the night they’d been taken. He’d had a few himself: the bus’s wheels humming through the night, *Junior High Band Management* open on his lap, and then the growing brightness out the bus windows, the high screech that seemed to emanate in the middle of his head before the short soft shock of waking on the fishbowl auditorium’s floor with their equipment and everything else from the bus scattered about. (No bus driver, though!) Those dreams had tapered off through the months. He thought, kids are resilient—if they have a structure, that is.

Thomas came by last. A short boy who played in the band because his parents told him it would look good on a college application, he’d never been an inspired musician, but he was competent enough. Thomas kept his head down as he passed. “Good morning,” he mumbled.

“Can I speak to you a moment?” Cowdrey moved away from the wall to block his path.

“Sir.” The boy didn’t meet Cowdrey’s gaze, but even his head held low couldn’t hide the bruise that glowered on his cheek.

“How’d that happen?”

Thomas glanced up, frightened for an instant, then his expression went bland and unassuming. “I fell in the shower. Slipped.”

The instruments tuning up in the practice rooms filled the silence between them.

Finally, Thomas said, “Look, I want to get away from here as much as the next person. If playing on pitch, on tune and to the beat is what it’s going to take, then I’ll do that.”

Cowdrey heard the Perfectionists echo in Thomas’s speech. “There

is no such thing as a perfect performance, Thomas.” He thought about Elise’s perfect pebble. Perfect because there were no pebbles here, nor weeds or malls or bicycles. No families. Nothing but each other and that day’s playing.

Thomas shrugged. “Yeah, well, maybe not, but I can be better. I don’t want it to be my fault the lights don’t flicker.”

“We don’t even know what that means, son. Flickering lights may not be their applause.”

The boy’s eyes revealed nothing, and for a moment he didn’t appear seventeen at all. He looked adult and tired and cursed with a terrible burden.

“Thomas, if someone is threatening you or hurting you, I need to know about it. That’s my job. You don’t have to play solo.”

Thomas studied the hallway beyond Cowdrey’s shoulder. A few steps past them, the hallway branched to the auditorium with its enigmatic windows. “My mom told me once that the world is a big place, and I could become anything I wanted to, but it’s not. It’s no bigger than the people you know and the places you go. It’s a small world here, Mr. Cowdrey, and I don’t have any place to hide in it, so I’m going to go to the practice room to see if I can’t get my act together a little better.” He pushed past the director.

The director threw himself into the morning’s work. Teaching is time management, he thought, and staying on task. He moved from student to student, checking intonation and technique. “It’s not all about the notes,” he said to a clarinet player. “Once you know the music, it’s about feeling the sound from your own instrument and your section. The song becomes more about heart than head.” The player nodded and replayed the piece.

For a time, mid-morning, Cowdrey sat in the practice room with the brass section. The leaders paced the group through their pieces, focusing on problems from yesterday’s session. Each had Elise Morgan’s suggestions to consult. Cowdrey watched Taylor Beau and Liz Waters, the numbers three and four chairs among the cornets. The couple wore matching silver crosses on chains around their necks. He wondered if they had given them to each other. Liz kept her red hair in a pony tail, and when she finished a long run of notes, her skin flushed, chasing her freckles to the surface. Taylor often played with his eyes closed, the music consigned to memory well before the other players. Although he wasn’t first chair, the section elected him for solos frequently, which he played with lighthearted

enthusiasm. The director thought about Elise's question on the marriage, and he remembered the duet Taylor and Liz worked up for the state competition. They played "Ode to Joy," and when they finished, they hugged. Now that he thought about it, he should have seen the budding relationship in the hug. You can't rehearse so often with the same person that you don't start having feelings about how they play. The breathing. The fingerings. The careful attention to each other's rhythm and tone. Harmonizing. Cowdrey shivered, thinking about music's sensuous nature.

The trombone section leader gave instruction. Cowdrey half listened while thinking about his first year in college, when he'd added the teaching certification program to his music major. Just for something to fall back on, he'd thought at the time. But when graduation came around, he'd found he liked teaching as much as he liked music, so moving into the schools didn't feel like settling for less. The kids in the room laughed, breaking Cowdrey from his reverie. The section leader was part way through an old band joke that Cowdrey couldn't remember the punchline for. The leader said, "So she dated a tuba player next, and her girlfriend asks how the date went. She says his embouchure was big and sloppy. It was like kissing a jellyfish." Most laughed, even the tuba player. "So, she says she went out with a French horn player next. How'd the date go? asks her friend, and the girl says he barely could kiss at all, his lips were so close together, but she liked the way he held her." A couple kids reacted right away, and ten seconds later, almost all laughed. Some looked embarrassed. "I hope that wasn't inappropriate, Mr. Cowdrey," said the section leader.

Cowdrey smiled. "Maybe you could go through those opening notes again. If you don't come in crisply, the back half flounders." He noticed Taylor and Liz held hands. Thomas, however, wasn't laughing. He clutched his horn close to his chest, his arms crossed over it like a shield. No one seemed to be paying special attention to Thomas. Whoever the Perfectionists were, they hid well. Thomas thought about Elise's suggestion that the band needed a distraction, something else to think about besides a perfect performance. Could that be a way to protect Thomas?

The section leader directed the brass back to the first movement. Pages turned. Instruments came up, and the group launched into the beginning measures. Cowdrey stepped back to watch and listen. They didn't look so young to him anymore. Beneath their long hair or ragged haircuts, their faces had lost the babyish look he associated with fifteen-year-olds. Just two years' difference, but he could see they'd changed. Their clothes strained to contain them. Their hands had grown so that no one stretched anymore to reach their instruments' keys. Their breath control had improved since they'd arrived, the improvement that came with

maturity. A ninth grader couldn't hold a note the way an older musician could. A fifteen-year-old couldn't hit the high parts with the same confidence as these kids could.

How long would they stay here?

Cowdrey walked behind the players. The wall cooled his back when he rested against it. What existed on the other side? Rooms filled with the brown smoke that eddied beyond the windows in the performance hall? He tried to imagine what creatures lurked in the brown smoke. Tentacles? Claws? Amorphous blobs? Or did he lean against a metal shell, inches from interstellar space? Maybe they had arrived on the creatures' home world and an entirely alien landscape waited beyond. Maybe, even, they had never left Earth, a few steps from home, hidden for their captors' amusement. (What did they want?)

But the question remained, how long would they stay? What if they would never leave?

Cowdrey frowned. A veteran teacher had told him, "When you teach, your life becomes the kids and the classroom. If there's anything else distracting you, then you're not doing the job." Of course, another teacher, equally experienced, countered, "Teaching is what you do. Life is why you do it."

He left the practice room. Pulsing sound greeted him when he opened the door into the percussionists' area. Their eyes didn't leave their music, and at the place where the bass drums kicked in, with the snares beating out a complicated counter-rhythm, he could feel his heart's pounding change to match it. Watching their hands blur to follow the music, seeing the vibrations from the instruments' side, he noticed for the first time how thick-wristed the drummers had become, like tennis pros who gained an over-developed forearm on their racket side, except for them both arms bulged. When Cowdrey had been in college, he went out to dinner with a long-time drummer. On a bet, the fellow had grabbed one table edge with his fingertips, and lifted it, drinks and dinner plates and all by the strength of his hands and wrists. "Years and years working a drum set, and look what it got me, a party trick." The drummer laughed.

Once again, Cowdrey saw that the kids weren't ninth graders any more. When it ended, the section leader turned to him. "I thought these changes in the backbeat Elise wrote were wonky when I saw them on the page, but once we got going on them, wow!" Others in the section nodded.

The morning unfolded. Session after session, the kids' growth struck him. They weren't in any real sense a school band anymore. They had evolved into something that had never existed in humanity before, because where before in human history had these conditions existed?

But it wasn't until he stood outside his room before lunch that he made up his mind. Elise turned the corner with her clipboard in hand, her notes for the day covering the top sheet. Instead of showing them to him, she stopped to look at the blank wall where Ms. Rhodes's door once had been. Clearly she hadn't noticed the disparity in the hallway. Elise touched the wall. For a second, Cowdrey worried she pictured what he had seen when he raised the nerve to go into Rhodes's room uninvited: the sheet twisted into a rope, the cloth cutting into her neck, the pathetic letters home she'd been writing since the first day they'd arrived.

Elise placed her palm flat on the wall where the door used to be. "It's adapt or die all the time, isn't it?"

Her crooked glasses made her look childish, but the top of her head stood almost level with his chin. He remembered when she'd been just a tiny seventh grader who handled her flute with an older musician's authority, but whose feet didn't reach the ground when she sat to play. Cowdrey knew then that Elise had become the band's heart. She drew the thread that kept them together so far—not his efforts, but hers. She held the late-night meetings with the section leaders to go over changes in music. She organized the informal ensembles. She had the energy others could draw on, including himself.

"Yes, it is." He took a deep breath. Cowdrey could feel the shift in his thinking happen. Suddenly, he wasn't a junior high band director. He was an older adult trapped with fifty competent young adults, if he could let them be that. If he could adapt to change. "Let's get them ready for the practice this evening, shall we?"

Elise raised her eyebrows.

That evening, Cowdrey took the podium. Under his hands, he held the music for the practice and his baton. Paper-clipped to the top sheet were his notes for areas to emphasize along with Elise's comments. The group fidgeted and chattered as they always did before practice. Cowdrey liked standing before the full band, when the day's work came together and he could measure the progress, and even though he hated the circumstances, he had to admit he'd never had a better performance facility. The light. The sound. The way the space flowed around them. Only the smoky windows

and the hidden audience jarred.

He picked up the baton. They looked at him expectantly. “Breathing first, Cougars. I’ll count off the seconds. Inhale.” He tapped eight seconds with the baton while they filled their lungs. “Hold.” With metronomic regularity he tapped out twenty-four more beats. They exhaled for eight, relaxed for ten, and then repeated twice more. At the end, the percussionists finished their set-up and the band waited. Breathing exercises calmed them, put them into the right mind. In his classroom at the junior high, which he could barely picture now, he’d hung a banner at the front: ALL MUSIC BEGINS WITH A GOOD BREATH (AND DIES WITH A LACK THEREOF).

Now they were ready. “An issue has come up that I think needs to be addressed. As most of you know, Taylor Beau and Liz Waters have asked my permission to marry.” Whatever whispering that might have been going on when he started the speech lapsed into silence. For an instance, Cowdrey pictured the school board and all the parents sitting in the back. What would they say at this announcement? Would they understand? He brushed aside the image, then plunged ahead. “I have thought about the request for a long time. Considering our situation and Taylor and Liz’s characters, I think they would make a fine married couple.”

Before the last syllable had time to fade, the band erupted into cheers and gleeful laughter. The attention at first focused on Liz and Taylor, who cried and hugged awkwardly from their chairs, their cornets still in hand, but soon Cowdrey saw a good number had surrounded Elise, shaking her hand and clapping her on the back. Cowdrey’s jaw dropped. He had, in every sense, been orchestrated. Finally, in the midst of the uproar, Elise caught his eye and mouthed, “Thank you.” He touched his forehead in rueful respect.

Thomas put his French horn on his chair, waiting his chance to congratulate the happy couple. A trombone player stood beside him, and they smiled as they chatted. It seemed as if it had been weeks since Cowdrey could remember Thomas looking relaxed. Cowdrey thought, a good decision and a distraction in one move. He smiled too.

Elise worked her way over to him. “We’ll need a wedding march.”

“I think Mendelssohn’s is in my books. That would be traditional. Besides, it would be appropriate. He was seventeen when he wrote it.” Cowdrey reached past her to high five a couple of flute players who had joined a conga line.

Elise shook her head. "That's a myth, I think. He wrote it later. Anyway, I have something I've been working on. Something of my own." Her eyes lowered.

"Why am I not surprised?"

It took the band a half hour to settle down. They cut the practice short after just two run throughs of the Beatles medley.

For the first time in two years, Cowdrey didn't walk the halls before going to bed. We are adults here, he thought. The paradigm has shifted. He sighed as he lay down, believing when he went to sleep his dreams would be undisturbed and packed with beautifully played music, but after an hour trying to convince himself he'd changed, he rose, dressed, and walked the hall, listening at each door. Satisfied at last, he went back to his room, and his dreams played undisturbed with flawless performances.

In the morning, he found a note pushed under his door. "A wedding will not get us home. They want a perfect performance! Get us home!" Cowdrey snorted in disgust. Nobody could know what they wanted. They might not want anything. He folded the note in half and put it inside his band management book. Even the Perfectionists couldn't bother him today, and they wouldn't, at least until after the wedding. And who knows, he thought, sometimes the best way to a long term goal is to focus on a short term one.

Elise distributed the new march to the section leaders, who organized a music-transcribing session. For over an hour, the band met in the auditorium to make their copies. "You'd think if aliens could snatch us up to play concerts, they could at least provide a decent photocopier," grumbled the oboist, who had several dozen bars of sixteenths and two key changes to write for herself.

A clarinet player finished, then studied the music. "This is cool. If I knew half as much as Elise does, I'd count myself a genius."

Cowdrey waited for someone to laugh. It wasn't the kind of comment kids make about each other. Someone else said, "Really!"

The rest continued to write. Cowdrey said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Maybe what they want is a well-played *new* piece. Soon as we finish here, break into your sections and work on this."

For the next three days leading to the Friday concert and wedding,

practice went better than Cowdrey could have imagined, and not just on the new piece either. They ascended to new heights during “March of the Irish Dragoons,” and they suddenly mastered the eighth-note quintuplets and the bi-tonal passages in “Ascensions” they’d fumbled before. Elise popped up everywhere, tweaking the music, erasing notes and rewriting passages, so every time Cowdrey rehearsed a section she had changed his pages.

On concert day, Cowdrey went to the auditorium early. He’d already realigned the chairs and moved the sections about to get the best sound balance for the new arrangements. The director’s platform could accommodate Taylor and Liz when they exchanged vows. He put his hands behind his back and circled the room. Even shoes clicking on the floor sounded beautiful in the auditorium’s acoustics. He paused at the window, which cast no reflection. Behind it, the auditorium light penetrated a couple of feet into the swirling brown cloud. Cowdrey cupped his hands around his eyes and leaned against the window to peer out. At first he’d been afraid to get against the glass. What if something horrible stepped forward, resolving itself from the smoke? He couldn’t imagine an event more startling, but over the years the band had played in this room, no one had ever seen anything. Now the sinuous smoke’s motion soothed him, as if he looked into ocean waves. It was meditative.

Elise cleared her throat when she entered. She wore her marching uniform, the most formal outfit anyone in the band had. Soon, the other members filtered in, filled with anticipation, gaily bedecked in their uniforms. A grinning Taylor and bashful Liz came in last, music tucked under their arms.

As he had a thousand times before, the director brought the band to attention, hands raised, ready for the downbeat. He inhaled deeply. A good breath, he thought. Let’s all start on a good breath. Soon, they were deep into the Beatles medley. Elise had changed the music so radically the original tune vanished at times, then resurfaced later in unexpected ways. The clarinets swelled with the “Yellow Submarine” bridge as the trombones’s improvisational bars ended. Later, out of a melodious but unrecognizable tune, the xylophone led them into “Hey Jude.”

They moved through song after song. Never had the band’s sound been so tight. Every solo hit right. Even the tricky transitions flew until they reached “The King’s Feast,” the second to last piece. He wiped sweat from his forehead before leading them into the opening bars, and it wasn’t until he neared the end that he realized the French horns had played their part exactly on beat. Thomas had hit his entrance on cue. Cowdrey almost laughed in relief as he brought them to the conclusion. Thomas was safe.

Cowdrey put the baton on the podium and nodded to Elise, who had already stored her flute on the stand next to her chair. She came forward solemnly, climbed the platform, then picked up the baton. Shuffling their papers, the band switched to her wedding march music. The baton's tip pointed up. She took her own deep breath. The march began, a lingering intro that sounded nothing like a march or wedding music, but soon the drums rose from behind. Cowdrey hadn't realized they were playing at all. He'd been paying attention to the odd harmonics in the flute and clarinet section. But there the drums were, dancing rhythms that made him shift his look to them. Then the brass opened, and the tune bounced from side to side, all in a few bars, all too quick before fading for the ceremony. Cowdrey closed his eyes. "What was that?" he thought. He almost asked her to play it again.

He stood to the side on the floor a foot below the director's platform, Taylor and Liz's wedding vows ready to read. On cue, the two held hands and came forward. Music swelled around them as they made their way toward the front. The musicians played with part attention on Elise and part on the young couple.

Cowdrey read a preamble, his heart in his throat, Elise's wedding march still in his ears. Taylor and Liz exchanged vows. They kissed. As they exited, arms around each other, two drummers threw confetti, and the band played the wedding march's coda, seeming to pick up without losing a beat. Nothing Cowdrey had ever heard sounded like this. Clarity of notes. Surprising shifts in scale. A moment where a single cornet carried the music before the band swallowed it whole, repeating the notes but changing them round so what was bright became dark, and the dark exploded like fireworks. The music filled Cowdrey's chest, pressed cold compresses of notes to his fevered head, made him sway in fear that it would end or the band would break, but they didn't. The music ascended and swooped and pressed outward and in. At the end, the sound flooded the room, as if to push the windows open to free the band from captivity and give them the grassy pastures Elise talked about so often, rushing toward the triumphant climax they'd been practicing for the last three days. Cowdrey heard wind caressing the tips of uncut grass. He smelled the meadow awash with summer heat. The music painted Earth and home so fully Cowdrey nearly wept from it, but then it ended. Elise held them on the last note, her face lit with concentration and triumph. Her fist closed, cutting the band off, leaving the memory of her composition lingering in the air. Cowdrey could still hear it, ringing. The lights began to flicker. They loved it, he thought. He turned to salute Elise, the ringing emanating from the middle of his head.

Then he recognized the sound in the strobe-effect lighting. It built until he thought it would burst him open, and he fell.

A short soft shock of waking.

His cheek rested against cool metal. A weight pressed against his other side. Groggily, Cowdrey sat up. He was in a bus parked in the dark. The student leaning against him groaned, rubbed her eyes, then sat up too. Other bodies stirred in front and behind them. Outside the window, a street light showed a long chain link fence and a sign, POLICE EVIDENCE YARD.

“My god,” said someone in a voice filled with disbelief. “We’re home.”

Someone started crying. Their voices mixed. Some whooped and yelled. Some laughed, all at once, voices and sounds mixing.

They poured from the bus into the parking lot, still in uniform, holding on to each other. A boy rattled the gate locked by a large chain and a hefty padlock. A head poked up in the lit window of the building beyond. A few seconds later two policeman carrying flashlights ran out the back door. Cowdrey started counting heads, but someone noticed before he did.

“Where’s Elise?”

For a second, the happy noise continued.

“Where’s Elise?”

Cowdrey stood on the step into the bus, looking over the crowd. One by one, they stopped talking. They didn’t appear so old now, the street light casting dark shadows on their faces. He stepped down, walked through them, checking each expression. No crooked glasses. No clipboard tucked under the arm.

Cowdrey pictured her alone in the empty auditorium. Were the lights still flickering? She, the one who wanted to go home the most, stood now, among the silent folding chairs, staring back at the swirling smoke behind windows. What had they wanted from us? What had they wanted?

The band looked at each other, then down at their feet, unable to meet each other’s gaze. They looked down, and Cowdrey couldn’t breathe.

He moved through the darkness surrounding the band, turning the ones toward him who faced away, searching their faces, but he had already accepted it. He'd lost her. Elise was gone.

As the cops unlocked the gates, shouting their questions, Cowdrey could see the days coming: the interviews, the articles in magazines, the disbelief, the changes in his life. One day, though, after the story had passed, he'd stand in front of another junior high band. He'd raise arms high before the first note, encouraging the players to take that first good breath. But Cowdrey could already feel in his chest the tightness, the constriction, and he knew he'd never be able to make the music good again.

He wouldn't be able to breathe.