

CHAPTER 1

# Beethoven & Me

Sunday, March 12, 1995 11:15 a.m.

THE PLANE BOUNCES and Beethoven falls off my lap. Raymond Chandler, too. I pick them up, stuff Chandler between the seats, and continue marking my mistakes in last night's *Moonlight Sonata*.

Kimberly, the flight attendant, says a snowstorm is sending us to Madison. I feel sorry for whoever's driving to Milwaukee for me. I hope I won't have to hitchhike. It has happened!

I didn't like how I played the opening of the second movement. The first movement ends still bulging with passion it can't release. Along comes the second, so innocent-seeming. Does it comfort the first, ignore it, not notice it, or what? When I first played the piece in public, age twelve, I showcased my technical mastery of the third movement's difficulties. At seventeen, I was soulful in the first movement, to get girls. I got more than I was ready for. At twenty, I realized the second movement's dance was the tough thing in the piece. Now it all focuses down to that first-to-second transition.

I close my eyes to dream it, but dream instead the big gestures in the third movement. Open my eyes, and someone outside is making big gestures. I think, "Those wouldn't work," and realize we've landed.

In the terminal, I find a wall phone, check my pocket diary, and dial. A laughing young woman's voice answers, "Concert ticket office, W-U-B-F." I ask for Gayle Summers, get put on hold, and hear my own playing, and an announcement for my concert tomorrow night. Then a relaxed alto says, "This is Gayle Summers."

"Arthur Singer, Ms. Summers. We landed in Madison."

She has a nice chuckle. "Wisconsin winter strikes again. There's no limo. You take a cab, and we'll reimburse you. Is that OK? I'll tell Security to let

you drive in. We're about an hour. In fact—hold on a moment, Mr. Singer.” She puts me on hold, and I hear more of my Mozart—my ideas about it are different now—then she returns to say a cab is bringing a fare, and the driver will come in for me.

At the airport shop, I buy stamps and four identical postcards of a cow in a field. I mail one to Lolly's kids:

*Hi, Josh and Amanda!  
Wisconsin is famous for  
its milk. Did you know it all  
comes from ONE giant cow?  
It's way bigger than this one!  
Love, Uncle Artie  
MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!*

I stick the other cards in my pocket and find a phone where I can see the front doors. Dial again, and when it's picked up I hear the Knicks game in the background, and my manager's cultured voice, "Music For a While Artist Management."

"Ollie, it's me."

The accent changes to exuberant Brooklyn. "Ahtie! Where are ya?"

"Madison airport. Who're they playing, Pacers?"

"Yeah, Knicks by five, thuhd quahta. The storm, huh? I saw it on the news. How'd it go last night?"

"Oh, we had Thanksgiving in March." A stale joke between us.

"Yeah? The toikey was what, the piano? The tuna?" (The *tuner*. I'll give the English from here on.) "I know, according to you, it can't be the audience. OH, REF! HE ONLY TOOK THIRTY-NINE STEPS!"

"Ollie, this tuning made the piano *worse*. Then there was the soft-pedal squeak, the bass rattle, and some *ugly* treble, none of which got fixed because you know why."

"Because they pay for tuning only. *You* didn't offer to pay, Artie?" The voice of suspicion.

"No," I lie. The tuner hadn't had time, anyway. "And here I am bitching, after all these years. I'm stale. I need R&R, and a good laugh."

"Well, the review headline was pretty funny. No, forget that. RILEY, TAKE HIM OUT, HE'S TIRED! Listen, Chicago Symphony booked you for '98."

"Great! You know, famous as they are, I still think they're underrated. So what was the review headline?"

"AND HE FOULS AGAIN! WHAT DID I TELL YA? Toledo Orchestra loves you, but nothing for now. But the recital-series manager heard you, and you're playing this October, the same hall. It's a handsome place. I'll find a photographer. You need new photos. Oh yeah, she wants Mozart and Beethoven, so you'll carry three programs next season. It'll keep you fresh."

"It'll keep me exhausted."

"Look on the bright side! October, the trees'll be changing, it'll be beautiful. And what else? Deepwater Symphony."

"They want me? I screwed myself there, remember?"

"I remember. They asked how you liked the acoustics, and you being thirteen at the time, you told them."

"And you told me afterward, it's a social question, like do you like the cheese dip."

"You remember that?"

"Of course I remember that!"

"That's nice. Anyway, that guy is gone, and you're playing Beethoven Third. NOT FROM THERE, PATRICK! OH, I WISH YOU HADN'T MADE IT! Now he's gonna start gunning. Bad news from Orchestra of the Plains."

"What bad? It went great. Here's a cab, wait a sec. The manager told me they spend so much energy fund-raising they're changing the name to Orchestra of the Panhandle. Not my cab."

"They ain't desperate any more. They're broke."

"Damn! And I lose two bookings, right?"

"Yeah, this was number one of three. We gave a rate." Multiple bookings were an exception to Ollie's First Rule: If they *pay* you less, they *value* you less. Eighteen years' experience had taught me she was right. Did I say Ollie's a she? It's Olivia.

"Ollie, did their check clear?"

"It's OK. They paid in advance for this year, in exchange for the reduction."

"Good thinking! So what was the headline?"

"It's from Podunk. Forget it."

"Ollie!"

"Okay, okay. 'Pianist's Technique Too Good.' Ridiculous, huh?"

"Listen, Ollie, turn it off a minute."

The sound stops. "Okay, I turned it off. The picture, too. I offended you, I'm sorry."

"You couldn't offend me if you tried. It's just—do you think this will work out?"

"Work out what?"

"Touring." I feel sheepish.

"What are you talking? You've been on the road what, eighteen years? What put this in your head?"

"I need new tux and tails, and they're a stretch even getting the fabric free. New photos and posters cost money. I'm thirty years old, I can't afford health insurance, my rent is a fortune, orchestras are going out of business—"

"You've got catastrophe coverage, right?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking, if I move back to L.A., in with my parents—"

"Look, if you didn't have to travel first-class, you'd be living the life of Reilly already." Two years earlier, economy-class seats got smaller and closer together. They've long been a squeeze; now they're impossible.

She continues, "I know you're not flying First just to spend money. But look: forty bookings this year. Next year forty-nine definite. You want to go higher, we can go higher. If you want the stress. You're gonna support my old age." She is seventy. "As for leaving New York, you make more contacts walking down West End to the cleaners than a year in L.A. You're in the black, right?"

"If I don't get new pix and concert clothes for a while."

"So we won't do photos. What about your stress?"

As a teenager, I played eighty concerts a year till my teacher finally said, "You play on temperrament only. Too much playing, playing, fooling around. Not enough prrrac-ticing, not enough *stahdee-ing*. I have seen zis before. I know vat happens. I'm trrrrying to save your life, Arrrtie. As human being. You must stop tourrring for a year or two. You will play in New York only. No trravel." He hesitated a long moment, "Orrr, you must find anoizzer teacher." *That*, I could not imagine. I thought pulling back from touring was the end of the world, and found it hard to get off the treadmill. It was the women, too. I was out of my depth, out of control. So I moved to an apartment in the building where he and his wife lived, ate with them often, shelled peas for dinner sometimes, played a few concerts where he could keep an eye on me, practiced enough to play my best, and improved my craft and art. Meanwhile, Ollie kept me on her roster. I've stayed away from women on the road since then, and I'm not home enough to form any real relationships.

I say, "I've been thinking, the whole concert system is screwy. Too many performers competing for not enough money."

"*This* is not news."

"But listen: Skip the whole system! Go direct to the audience with a TV series."

"Sure. The trick is getting the series. We'll talk when you get back. Do you realize you complain every March?"

"I do? You never told me that."

"Without fail. That's one reason this college thing is good. You'll perform and teach, they'll love you, you'll love them. No airplanes for a week. Sleep, practice. You can work on your technique so it won't be too good."

"Ha ha."

"You're not laughing. Listen, do you mind I turn it on?"

"Go ahead."

The play-by-play comes up, and she says, "Midwestern people are calmer than we are. You'll see!"

"Here's another cab. Yeah, he's coming in. Gotta run."

"*Merde* for tomorrow, Artie! ALLEY-OOP! THAT'S THE WAY! Bye, Artie!"