

CHAPTER 8

Professor Howard led us to his classroom, rather than his office. "How are you doing, Andy?" he asked as I handed him the theremin. He handled it like it was a delicate glass sculpture.

"Surviving."

"He's not doing very well, dad." Hanna interjected.

"She exaggerates," I said. "I wanted to thank you for the cash. Looks like it'll come in handy."

"If I can help in any way..."

"You've already done plenty. I certainly appreciate your offer, but really, I'll be okay."

"Make sure you take care of yourself, then," he said. "Okay, I've done quite a bit of research on the Internet. Do you two want to hear what I've learned about your mysterious instrument?"

"Yeah, sure. For starters, what exactly is it?" Hanna said.

"A logical question, but one I can't answer with any certainty at the moment, unfortunately. If it is an antique theremin, it must be a very rare one because I haven't found anything on the Internet that resembles it. There's no recognizable brand name to compare it with either, which would have made my job much easier."

He lifted the theremin in front of him and examined all sides of it. "Okay, some random observations: I assume it's battery-powered since there's no cord, unless there are some photovoltaic panels built in that I can't see. As Hanna mentioned to me earlier, it's very solidly built and certainly very unusual. I'd love to have a look inside the case, but from what I can see that isn't going to happen and I don't want to risk damaging it by trying to pry it open. The bottom line is that I have no way to examine the technology inside the case."

"You're going to flip when you hear the kind of music it makes, dad. Do you really think there's a possibility it might be a real theremin?"

"I'm no expert on theremins, but if you don't mind I'd still like to have a go at playing it if we can get it working again. I've actually handled several different theremins in the past, and I even had an opportunity to play a genuine antique theremin once. Like almost everybody else in the world who has ever tried his hand at it, I didn't do very well. They're extremely hard to master, which is why there aren't many theremins, or, for that matter, theremin virtuosos in the world."

"How do they work?" I asked.

"You literally play the air around the theremin," Professor Howard said. He tried to illustrate what he was saying by moving his hands around the antennae, but nothing happened.

"That sounds simple enough," Hanna said, "but I notice it isn't working for you either."

"Unfortunately not," her father said as he continued trying to play the instrument without success. "To complicate matters, there are dozens of

factors that change the behavior of the original theremins, including temperature, humidity and even the size of the room where they're being played. That's because back then the original theremins had vacuum tubes and pretty crude technology. However, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that there's no way this instrument could have been built in the twenties. Given what I know about it so far from talking to Hanna, and what I've just seen with my own eyes, it's got to be something much more sophisticated."

"So if it's a modern theremin, there's no chance that a neophyte could sit down and play it without any training?" I asked.

"No way. You can see how difficult it would be to play even the simplest of songs with one of these. There are only a few people in the world that can consistently create music with a theremin at a professional level, which explains why there aren't many theremin concerts these days. And yet, from what Hanna told me, you somehow managed to create some music with this, first time you played it. I have to admit that doesn't make sense. It makes me wonder if it isn't really just some kind of fancy boom box in disguise."

"You wouldn't believe how incredibly beautiful his music was. It definitely sounded professional to me," Hanna said.

"So it's probably not an antique, then?" I asked, trying to keep the disappointment from my voice.

"It's got to be modern technology," Hanna said, agreeing. "This thing couldn't have vacuum tubes inside it, because the case is sealed, right?"

"Correct," her father said. "Vacuum tubes would overheat very quickly and that would be the end of its music. These days, various companies make similar instruments produced with digital, analog and infrared technologies, and this might be one of them. Interestingly enough, however, your box doesn't look anything like the latest generation of theremins and electronic synthesizers I researched. Now, it could be something that's been cobbled together by a hobbyist, but without having a look inside I can't verify that."

"Hanna mentioned earlier that the original theremin was invented in the early part of the last century," I said. "How could anybody have dreamed up something as sophisticated as a theremin back in those days? That was back when they were building Model T's, wasn't it?"

"That's what makes the story so fascinating," Professor Howard said.

"The guy who invented it was a Russian by the name of Leon Theremin. Apparently he was something of an eccentric genius. Back in 1922 he actually demonstrated a prototype for Vladimir Lenin, who hoped to use it as a propaganda tool for the communist party. He took it on a concert tour across Russia and then around the world. Leon Theremin moved to the United States for several years and then vanished mysteriously in the late thirties. He died not too long ago, but it wasn't until fairly recently that we learned he was forced to work for the KGB all those years on some of their top-secret spy technology. He truly was an amazing man, according to what I've read about him."

"If he was really a genius, why did he waste his time inventing a musical instrument nobody could play?" Hanna asked.

Her father was about to reply when several young people accompanied by an elderly professor appeared in the doorway. My jaw dropped when I realized that one of them was Keith, and when I looked over at Hanna I noticed she had a very hostile expression on her face.

Professor Howard ignored us and waved them inside. "Andy, we have some of your fellow high school students here for an orientation session because they've applied to our university. I asked Professor Johnson to round up a half dozen or so of them as an audience in case you're able to get this machine going again. Something Hanna told me about what occurred back at your house has piqued my curiosity, so I'd like to hear you play the theremin in front of a live audience to confirm a theory of mine."

"Not a problem," I said, "although I wouldn't count on them being entertained by whatever crude sounds I'm capable of producing. As you know, I'm not a real musician."

"Before you give it a try," Professor Howard continued, "let me explain more about the proper technique for playing a theremin. The pitch varies depending on how close your right hand is to the vertical antenna. The loudness is determined by the proximity of your left hand to the tubular loop on the side of the box. When you're about an inch from the antenna it's almost totally silent. As you move away from the loop, it gets louder. What you want to do is keep your left hand as far away from the volume antenna as possible at first so the volume stays low. Next you move your right hand near the loop antenna until you locate the position that creates the exact pitch you're looking for. It's called 'trimming' the instrument. After that, since there's no physical reference like a keyboard to guide you, you'll just have to play it by ear. Literally. Any questions?"

"Nope."

Hanna's father indicated to the students that they should take seats near the front of the classroom and Professor Johnson forced his lanky frame into one of the chairs with them. Professor Howard then passed out pieces of foolscap paper and felt markers. "Okay, I want everybody to write down a short phrase that describes exactly what, if anything, you hear over the next few minutes. No more than three words, so you don't run out of room on the paper. And be honest. Andy, are you ready?"

He placed the theremin on top of the desk in front of me, and, just like it had at the house, the dial of the instrument began to glow green as it came to life. Hanna smiled at me encouragingly and suddenly all the issues that had been weighing so heavily on my mind that day began to fade into the recesses of my consciousness. I couldn't help but smile as I contemplated playing the theremin once again.

This time, as my hands approached the antenna I decided to attempt to perform a specific song. That ultimately proved impossible because once I started to play, the theremin seemed to have a mind of its own and took me in a totally different direction. The music was dramatic, loud and aggressive, and at first it resembled some classical pieces I'd once heard. I felt like I was riding at the front of a powerful locomotive, an unstoppable force heading off into the unknown. I couldn't pick out any individual instruments that I recognized but the overall effect of this music was so exhilarating that I soon

found myself laughing out loud.

I was totally drained when at last the piece ended. I stood beside the musical instrument with my hands at my sides and discovered that while I was playing everybody in the room had gathered around the theremin. They all seemed stunned at first until finally one of the students turned to the person beside him and said, "I don't care how much it costs. My parents are going to buy me one for grad or else I threaten to start using narcotics."

Professor Howard was standing to one side of me with a small tape recorder in his hand and a very serene look on his face. He clicked it off.

"I hope you don't mind, Andy, but I decided I'd better record your performance. I've got to tell you, I've seldom experienced any music quite so powerful. Truth is, I've never heard classical music with such depth and emotion," he said as he held up his piece of paper with the words "classical" and "magnificent" scrawled on it.

Hanna smiled knowingly as she brandished her paper, which had "love song" neatly printed on it. "That obviously wasn't what I heard at all."

"I have no idea how this machine is able to replicate such a wide variety of instruments doing such amazing things," Professor Howard continued, "and I can't even identify which instruments it was emulating. This is more than a theremin. It's technology that music lovers have fantasized about for decades. Some genius has managed to synthesize the very essence of what makes music such a powerful force. I'm telling you, it was wonderful!"

He snapped out of his reverie and turned to face the group of students. "So, what did you guys think?"

"Brilliant music," one young woman said as she showed them her piece of paper with "opera" written on it in capital letters beside a crude caricature of a fat soprano. "I've never been more moved."

"Fantastic," said another. His piece of paper had "punk rock" on it.

"I hate to admit this, but I'm a fan of country and western music and that's exactly what I heard, sort of," said the third student with a very puzzled look on his face. "I don't understand how this works, but I sure enjoyed listening to it."

Keith was less enthusiastic. His piece of paper said "crap" punctuated with about a dozen exclamation marks. "You guys are so full of it. I don't know what you heard, or thought you heard, but you're all totally wrong. I'm the only professional musician here..."

"I guess I don't count, then, Keith?" Professor Howard said with a smile.

"As I was saying," Keith continued, "I'm the only one here who has actually been paid for performing music. Either the rest of you were hallucinating when you listened to what this amateur supposedly just played, or you're lying for some reason. Frankly, I don't care which it is because as far as I'm concerned, that was the most boring music in the world, and I do know what I'm talking about."

"Yeah, I've heard your band," one of the students said with a smirk. "You're an expert in boring music all right."

"Interesting take on what you experienced, Keith, but be more

specific," Professor Howard said, ignoring the other student's comment. "Tell me, what exactly did you hear?"

"It sounded sort of like the garbage my mother listens to when dad's not around, you know, stuff from old operas with fat women yodeling. I've always hated it, ever since I was a kid."

"Could you actually hear the individual singers while he was playing?"

"Nope. It was a mishmash of noises, actually, and I couldn't really pick out any singers or instruments. I couldn't recognize the melody at all." He paused. "You know what I think?"

Professor Howard laughed. "I have a feeling we're about to find out."

"I think this was a setup. This so-called theremin is just some kind of CD player, and the quality of its speakers is so poor that it's no wonder the rest of you didn't have any idea what you were listening to. It's a joke, folks, just like this class. Andy has no musical talent to speak of, as far as I can see, and if his music is an example of the kind of things you teach in your classes, students probably sign up for it only because it's an easy credit. No matter what the truth is, there's no way he played that music himself. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Wrong on all counts," Professor Howard said. "For one thing, as soon as you make your arguments personal you forfeit your credibility. I'm assuming you won't be signing up for any of my classes now, so I guess you figure it's safe to tell me what you really thought, eh?"

"There wasn't anything you could teach me anyway," Keith said. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd be better off practicing in the garage with my guys. Nothing personal, Professor Howard."

The fifth student, who had sat quietly, intently watching each of the speakers in turn stating their opinions, finally raised his hand to get the professor's attention. His paper was blank.

Professor Howard held his hand up to silence the other students, and then pointed in his direction. "Yes?"

The young man had some kind of a serious speech impediment that made him difficult to understand, and he punctuated his words with a series of animated gestures that were distracting to watch. "I don't know how to describe what just happened to me, but it's the most incredible thing I've ever experienced. I don't know what music sounds like, but I think that's what I just heard for the first time in my life. It's incredible!"

"Andy," Professor Johnson said quietly as he positioned himself carefully so that the student would be able to see his face as he spoke, "did I mention that Greg is profoundly deaf? He can't hear a thing, and he's been that way since he was born."

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