

was adapted for the clarinet and cello for this occasion. As they were playing, Aaron didn't feel scared at all. In fact, it was the most fun he ever had. The melodies were filling the otherwise silent music hall with the help of the better-than-usual acoustics.

As soon as the piece was finished, the audience clapped and cheered. The piece was finally over and Aaron couldn't help but smile at his efforts.

All in all, Aaron was happy to perform and he learned that everyone is nervous before something big happens, whether it's a concert or a wedding or a bar mitzvah. There's nothing to be nervous about when we know we'll have a great time and have excellent memories of the experience. So calm down, already.

Meanwhile, Mabel the skipper was still standing by a palm tree in the prehistoric land of Mesozoa overlooking the landscape. She had been waiting for over a week, but Taro still hadn't come. What could be taking him so long?

performance and, truth be told, Delilah didn't feel that weird about singing a love duet with a boy she hated.

When she and the others walked off stage, she felt like she accomplished something worthwhile.

"You were pretty good out there," said Satchel. After saying the compliment, his cheeks turned a bit red. This moment seemed almost unreal to Delilah.

"Thank you," she said in return. Satchel wanted to hide his true feelings. Fortunately, he thought of the perfect way.

"You're *not* welcome!" He then stomped off, leaving Delilah next to the extra music stands.

"See?" said Aaron, "I told you he liked you."

Next to Aaron was Beckett von Trapp, the boy with which he was playing the duet.



"Hi, Beckett," said Aaron, "Are you nervous? Because I'm not." This was a strange thing to say, but Aaron wanted to proclaim the absence of his stage fright.

"I'm not scared, either," said Beckett.

"You aren't? But why not?"

"I think it's because my great grandfather was one of the Von Trapp family singers."

"You mean the ones featured in *The Sound of Music*?"

"Uh-huh. You know how much they loved to perform. I think I got my love for performing from them."

"You had your relaxed attitude about this with you all along. I had to be taught to have mine." At that moment, the music teacher stepped in to tell them that they were expected on stage soon.

"You two are up next," said Mr. Barker. Before going on stage, Aaron felt that he had to say one last thing to Beckett.

"You're so interesting," he said, "Why haven't you told me about yourself before?"

"Because you never bothered to ask," said Beckett with his clarinet firmly in his grip. The two looked at each other and walked onstage to where everybody was gazing at them and waiting for a song. They sorted through their sheet music so they could find the correct piece for that evening. When the teacher gave his signal, Aaron and Beckett began playing Minuet in G Minor, a piece originally written for the piano by Bach but

“I’m a young monster,” said Kelly the pelbo, “Give me some.”

It was getting late (Aaron’s watch was still set for New Jersey’s time zone) and Aaron learned all he needed to know from Jonathan. He walked out into the darkness and escaped the smell of cookies, a smell which tempted him to ignore his doctor’s orders. Kelly the pelbo was perched on his shoulder munching a cookie that still had steam coming from the place where she bit.

“Thank you for teaching me all those things,” said Aaron, “I’m so ready for the concert now!”

“I wish you the best of luck,” said Jonathan, “I have to get home to my wife since she’s making pot roast.” He closed the door behind him and turned on his flashlight to combat the nighttime’s unpredictable shade. Aaron walked beside him, as they were headed toward the same destination. He didn’t feel like talking, but Jonathan managed to fill the awkward silence with his words. “You may think playing an instrument at a concert is difficult, but I have to conduct an entire *group* of instruments. I have to understand the order of the instruments and the tempo. It may look like I’m playing with a stick, but it’s much more than that...”

One night later, the stage was set at the music school’s concert hall. People were chatting away in their seats and reading the playbill, which included musical performances, like Aaron’s, and scenes from Broadway musicals, like what Delilah was doing. Aaron peered out from behind the curtain to see how many people were there. Three quarters of the seats were full, which intimidated him.

Delilah was adorned with teenage fifties attire and her hair was in a ponytail that was located slightly above where it usually was. In a few minutes, she would play Sandy, but at the moment she was busy expressing her brewing hatred for Satchel, the boy playing Danny.

“You have no right to tell me that I’m ugly!” said Delilah, “The teacher picked me for a reason!”

“You can rot in H-E-double-hockey sticks for all I care!” said Satchel with his hair greased up. That very statement made Delilah gasp in horror.

“You’d rot there longer if you had actually said that swear word!” The voice teacher decided to interfere since this argument wasn’t going to solve itself.

“Children, children!” he said while getting between them, “You’re supposed to be young lovers, not a married couple!”

Aaron stood next to his cello, which was roughly his size, trying to ignore the argument that was taking place. As the head of the music school was about to make his opening announcement on stage, Aaron became more anxious. It was only minutes before he had to go up there. He stopped worrying when he remembered all that Jonathan told him: music is natural, don’t be afraid to play it; you are stronger than your fears; the audience is not out to get you; by playing music with a friend, you are a part of creating something beautiful that you could not create alone.

After the performance of the song “Summer Loving” by the children’s choir, the audience clapped wildly. Satchel and Delilah had stopped fighting so they could get into character and concentrate on their roles and voices. They were finally done with their

Jonathan took his pupil to the temple's kitchen, the only room in the temple adorned with modern day appliances. The scent of lemon was present in the air, though it was probably artificial.

"Why are we here?" questioned Aaron, "Are you going to make me jump over eels again?"

"Certainly not," said Jonathan, "I would like you to help me make something." Jonathan opened the fridge and got out an egg (a chicken's egg, not a monster's egg). "You say you're playing a duet with somebody?"

"Yes," said Aaron. Jonathan held up the egg so Aaron and Kelly could see it clearly.

"Would you eat this egg?"

"Yes, if it were scrambled or poached."

"No, not scrambled or poached. I'm asking if you would eat this egg *raw*." What a ridiculous question! Where could this possibly be going?"

"No, that would be disgusting."

"I wouldn't eat a raw egg, either." Jonathan then proceeded to crack the egg on the side of a bowl so he could pour the yolk and whites inside. He picked up a bag of flour that was beige and slightly wrinkled.

"Would you prefer to eat this bag of flour?"

"No. Why are you asking me such weird questions?"

"You'll see, *mein freund*." Jonathan added other real world ingredients to the bowl, including milk, sugar, and cinnamon. "I want you to stir these ingredients." Aaron picked up the wooden spoon beside the bowl and stirred the contents. At first it was hard, but soon the ingredients started unifying as Aaron kept moving the spoon around and around. A smile appeared on his face when he unintentionally splashed some batter onto his cheek. "I say it's about ready for baking." Jonathan got out a cookie sheet with aluminum wrap and placed on the surface. Jonathan scooped the globs of batter onto the sheet the best he could in bite-sized form, though they weren't all perfect.

"Do you understand the point of that lesson?" asked Jonathan.

"Lesson?" asked Aaron, "We were just baking cookies."

"Those cookies included the raw egg that you *didn't* want to eat. That raw egg went a long way, son. We combined it with some other ingredients to make something that many people enjoy." Jonathan does it again! He showed Aaron how something in everyday life could be applied to the experience of performing music. What a wise man he was. "Music is the same way. One instrument playing the background harmony won't sound that good alone, but when played with other instruments contributing to the song, it sounds beautiful."

"So... I'm contributing to something beautiful."

"Yes, and the show can't go on without you." By then, Aaron, stress level was at such a low level that his confidence began overpowering his fear. Now, he couldn't wait to play his song in front of a group of people. "I'll bet you can't wait to eat those cookies."

"I can't eat those cookies, Jonathan."

"Why not?"

"Because I have diabetes."

"That's okay. I'll give them to the young monsters as an act of kindness."



“What are these things?” asked Aaron.

“I think they’re the spiritual manifestations of fear,” said Kelly, “You’re filled with fear at the moment and that’s why they’re consuming you!” The spirits multiplied as Aaron became more afraid.

“What are you waiting for? Attack them!” Kelly the pelbo was unsure about using physical force on the spirits, though she wanted them to go away as much as Aaron.

“I don’t know, Aaron. They look strong.” Since she didn’t have any other choice, she jumped out of Aaron’s arms and formed a tiny star within her fork-like tail and unleashed the only attack she knew. “Starlight puff!” The puff hit one of the demons and caused him to shrink rapidly. Soon, it looked like a purple pea with eyes. She used the same attack on another one, which transformed it from a giant purple snake with thorns all over its body into a mere worm.

“Keep attacking, Kelly!” Kelly unleashed more starlight puffs and they all hit the spirits and made them small and weak.

As soon as the last one shrank, Aaron opened his eyes and rejoined reality, just as it was before he went to the strange otherworld. He felt more empowered than before, more willing to jump over the space filled with flammarsis. Before even thinking about it, he ran toward the space in the floor and jumped as soon as he reached the edge. He didn’t bother to look down, since that is the number one rule of crossing dangerous-looking areas. Before long, he stepped onto the other side and slowed down his running. As soon as he caught his breath, he realized that he made it to the other side safely.

“Good job, pupil!” applauded Jonathan, “You discovered that you are stronger than your fears.”

“That was still a stupid thing to do. I mean, what if I actually had fallen into the dangerous waters?”

“Those flammarsis never intended to hurt you in the first place.”

“Yeah,” said one flammarsi, “We wouldn’t hurt a gnat.” Aaron felt betrayed by the kindly man.

“You lied to me!”

“I have lied to you, yes, but I am doing it to teach you a lesson. I am showing you that the audience of your concert isn’t out to get you; they’re out to have a good time.” Aaron felt a little better and much more confident. Though he was still a bit angry at Jonathan, his stress level went down from the test he endured.

“My point is that music-making is natural, as natural as the things that inspired it. Do you feel a little better now?” Aaron searched deep down inside and discovered that his stress levels were a bit lower than before he went outside.

“Yes, I do. I shouldn’t be afraid of things that come naturally.”

“Atta’ boy. Now you understand.”

Aaron and Jonathan went back into the temple, into a strange room. This room was unlike any other because there was a giant, rectangle-shaped gap in the middle of the floor. It wasn’t a place where you would wander in the dark.

“Why did you take me here?” asked Aaron.

“When musicians need to play in front of an audience, there is fear in their hearts and minds. What I want you to do is overcome your fear.” Aaron knew there was a catch, but he didn’t know what it was.

“How do I do that?”

“By jumping over this gap in the floor.” Aaron wasn’t so scared. How hard could it be?

“This should be a piece of cake,” he said.

“There’s just one thing...” Jonathan flipped a switch on the wall and a little door within the gap opened. Out of this door came rushing water and three flammarsis (eel-like monsters with electric abilities). Within seconds, the pool of water became electrified by their presence. Aaron gulped and squeezed Kelly the pelbo real tight.



“No way am I jumping over that! You’re crazy, man!” Jonathan laughed in a manner befitting Santa Claus, signifying that he may have or may not have been crazy.

“You’re scared because of those fears inside you. I want you to close your eyes.”

“How will that help me?!”

“I’m not finished yet. I want you to close your eyes and imagine that you and your monsters are in a wide-open space.” Aaron closed his eyes and began to see visions.

In his mind, Aaron appeared in a blank space clutching Kelly the pelbo in his arms, just like Jonathan said. The space that appeared was infinite, but he didn’t want to move because something unpredictable could happen in such a space. Out of the floor came purple ghouls and dark beings that were shadow-like in structure, but scary and powerful at the same time. These beings tried clawing Aaron and Kelly, but Aaron backed away and avoided the attacks as much as possible.

“How do you stay so calm all the time? You didn’t even look nervous when you conducted the symphony, yet here I am pooping bricks over a concert that I have to perform tomorrow.” This was a perfect opportunity for wise Jonathan to teach Aaron some of the elements of music spiritualism and how he could apply them to everyday life.

“I have my way of life to thank. Slip into a comfortable robe and follow me outside.”

Aaron managed to find the best fitting robe in the temple’s closet, even though it wasn’t particularly his favorite color. He followed Jonathan outside to where the small cascade and the sleeping jungle flowers were residing. Jonathan sat down Indian-style while Aaron was exploring the area.

“Sit down, my pupil,” said Jonathan. Aaron sat down in the lush grass that was almost comfortable enough to sleep on if it weren’t for the worms and bugs.

“Now, Aaron,” said Jonathan, “I understand that you’re nervous about the big concert tomorrow and that all this nervousness is making you stressed.” Jonathan understood fully what thoughts were going through Aaron’s head.

“You read me like a book...”

“Everyone is nervous before performing, even the greatest actors and musicians. One way we can get rid of that excess stress is to breathe deep, like this.” Jonathan inhaled through his nose loud enough for Aaron to hear and then he exhaled through his mouth. Aaron did the same, though it felt weird at first because this wasn’t how he normally breathed. “Now listen to the sounds that you hear. Sound has existed since the dawn of the universe, but it didn’t truly exist until the first ears could hear it – ears like ours.” Aaron focused on everything his ears could detect and calmly ignored the other four senses. In the background, he heard the cascade trickling down the rocks, jungle owls giving their territorial calls and peeping frogs trying to get mates. “What do you hear?”



“I hear frogs, owls, and that waterfall,” said Aaron.

“You are hearing music, *mein freund*.”

“Music?”

“Yes. Where do you think music originally came from? Our ancestors were inspired to create music by listening to the sounds of nature. The singing birds, the howling wolf, the pouring rain. These were the first music teachers.” Aaron thought about what he said and realized that he was indeed on to something.

“What’s your point?”



“Who is that?” pondered Aaron.

“Why, that is Edelweiss,” said Jonathan, “He is the legendary music monster representing the element of earth. Would you like to hear how I became the man I am today?” Aaron nodded his head; he wanted to sit down and do something while his monster was healing and there was nothing better to do than hear a story. “When my twin sister and I were toddlers, the legendary monster Cecilia kidnapped us because she wanted children of her own. I was eventually rescued by an older boy and girl who just so happened to be twins as well. Edelweiss heard about their brave attempt of rescuing us and was impressed. He dug himself out of the ground in front of us children and embraced my sister and I in his trunk. From that day forward, I decided not only to dedicate my life to music, but to spiritualism as well. After all, you’d feel enlightened, too, if you were held by not one, but two musical deities.”

Jonathan took Aaron into the other room to make him a pot of tea. Kelly the pelbo was feeling a little better after the painful darts were removed from her skin. Aaron wanted more information about Jonathan’s lifestyle and daily routines. He couldn’t get enough of Rhythm and Melody World religion.

“What is your life like anyway?” asked Aaron.

“My profession, as you know, is conducting for the New York philharmonic, but I come here to meditate and socialize with others. Sometimes, I actually communicate with the legendary monsters via this temple. In short, I am a rhythm and melody spiritualist.”

“I have just one question?”

“What is that?”

“Are you fo’ real?” Jonathan laughed a little.

“Yes I am, young one. Yes I am.”

“Can you tell me something?”

“What would that be?”

“Bravo,” said a voice. Behind a giant leaf was a tranquil-sounding man clapping slowly. He looked to be in his fifties and had on a colorful robe that was almost visible in the darkness. He spotted Aaron with his handy flashlight, almost blinding him. “Your monster isn’t bad for a beginner. She needs to work on her speed, though.”

“This was her first time,” said Aaron

“Chibibuds aren’t usually out this late. It must’ve been that stash of pixie sticks.” This man knew quite a bit about the jungle, as if he observed its activity over a number of years, or decades even.

“Where did you come from?”

“Come with me.” Aaron was told that he shouldn’t associate with strangers, but this man was calm and trusting. In fact, something about his seemed eerily familiar.

The man brought Aaron to a beautiful temple located beyond the leaves and palm trees. This temple looked like an ancient Asian structure, but it was shiny and clean at the same time. Statues of leonises (monsters that looked like giant earth lions) greeted the musicians near the staircase leading to the entrance. The small, many-layered cascade that was trickling off the smooth rocks into a delicate pond wasn’t powered by electricity – it was real.



“This is my temple,” said the man, “I built it here years ago and monsters and people come here to pray to the legendary monsters and become spiritually enlightened.” Looking at the man’s face, Aaron realized why he seemed so familiar. He just had to blurt it out.

“You’re Jonathan Sinclair!” said Aaron, “That guy who conducted the orchestra last night!”

“I see someone recognizes me,” said the man, “You can just call me Jon.”

Inside the temple were potted exotic plants and statues of various jungle monsters. At the back end of the room was a finely polished statue the legendary monster of earth. He was elephantine in shape and had large flowers where his ears were. Monsters and people had previously left gifts for him upon visiting the statue capturing the monster’s dominion and glory.

“The Jade Jungle has a variety of monster and plant species, some not native to anywhere else,” said Kelly the pelbo, “Unfortunately, its mosquitoes carry a variety of diseases, and we all know how easy it is to get bitten by one on a hot day.”

The children took a calm stroll through the wilderness, but Chastity couldn't tolerate stepping in any more puddles and accidentally touching foreign leaves. Lucia wasn't as afraid as she was; in fact, she wanted to go home for an entirely different reason.

“I'm turning back, Aaron,” said Chastity, “It's almost time for Lucia's nap.” Lucia was yawning and struggling to keep her eyes open, which was difficult because the night sky was constantly assuring her that it was bedtime.

“You chickens can go home,” said Aaron, “Kelly and I are going to keep walking on the wild side.” Chastity walked in the other direction toward the portal station and Aaron continued into the wild and unpredictable jungle.

“This is awfully suspicious,” said Kelly quivering a bit, “A monster should've ambushed us by now-” Just then, a small creature fell from the trees. It was a monster that looked like a raindrop with a tiny head, dog ears, and a flower around its neck. It was angry and ready to attack, like a monster out of an RPG battle.

“Give me your lunch money!” said the monster, talking in school bully metaphors. The monster was a chibibud, a bottom-level with a spunky attitude, like a rambunctious puppy.

“I'll take care of this!” said Kelly the pelbo. As a baby, Kelly didn't have much experience in battling, but she was perfectly capable of showing this monster who was boss.



“Starlight puff!” said Kelly. She gracefully leapt into the air and shot a tiny, fuzzy star out of the end of her fork-like tail. The star hit the chibibud in the face, reducing his hit points. Nonetheless, he got up and shook off the dirt from his fur.

“Vine darts!” shouted the chibibud. The flower surrounding his head closed up and tiny, green darts came out of the small hole in the front. Kelly may have been intelligent for her age, but she was too late in comprehending when to dodge an attack. The darts hit her and she was weakened by the stinging blows. She didn't want to give up, so she opened her eyes and unleashed another starlight puff attack, despite the fact that darts were still embedded in her squishy skin. The attack hit the chibibud again, diminishing his health points to zero and ending the battle.

Aaron was happy about his monster partner's victory, but he was worried about the damage done to her. Since she was too weak to move her body, Aaron picked her up and cradled her like a poor, abandoned kitten.

“Maybe he’s being mean so he can cover up his true feelings” said Aaron. “I noticed that the orchestra conductor last night was eerily calm when he was on stage. Maybe once we find out his secret, we won’t be as nervous about our performances.”

Later, Aaron felt like a little adventure. He wanted to go to the Rhythm and Melody World, so he bugged Chastity since he and his low-level monster didn’t want to go alone.

“Alright, alright,” said Chastity as she was inscribing numbers and symbols on her paper, “But Lucia isn’t that strong, either. If we run into a top-level monster, we’re pretty much screwed.”

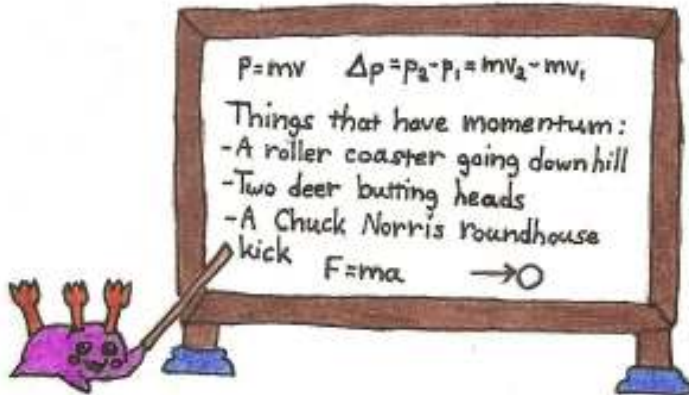
“I promise we’ll go to a part where the monsters aren’t that strong. You know, where beginning musicians train their monsters.” Chastity finished her homework and put it in her backpack for tomorrow. She stood up and headed toward the door, expecting her brother to do the same, but as she was about to turn the doorknob, she noticed that Aaron was still in the kitchen.

“Well? Are you coming?”

“We have to wait until Kelly finishes teaching her physics class to those confused teenagers.”

Kelly the pelbo, being the intelligent baby monster that she was, was in Aaron’s room with a group of teenagers in a circle around Aaron’s desk. She had a pointer in her tiny nub and a small white board propped up beside her.

“Momentum is the combination of mass and velocity in a moving object,” she said, “The things listed are all things that have momentum. Any questions?”



After purchasing the tickets at the portal station, Aaron and Chastity stepped into a portal and took their monsters to the wilderness of the Jade Jungle. The jungle was in a different time zone, so darkness cascaded along the sky and there was no light besides the hundreds of stars glistening above. Tiny frogs were making noises while the rest of the music monsters slept.

“Are you sure you want to be here?” asked Chastity with Lucia the jellyfish.midi in her arms, “People take advantage of the darkness to do bad things. I’m sure music monsters aren’t any different.” Aaron was fascinated by this particular climate, where even at night the weather was balmy and humid.

ready to do it even though he practiced all week. His thoughts were interrupted by the b-phone ringing.

“Delilah Bertolli,” it said using its caller ID function.

“Ear, please,” he ordered his b-phone. The bee-shaped communication device flew up to his ear and connected him to the person on the other line.



“Hey, Delilah,” said Aaron.

“I just felt like calling,” said Delilah, “So how was the concert last night?”

“It was great! You should’ve been there!”

“Are you excited about our performances tomorrow night?”

“I’m nervous, Delilah. I’ve never performed with my cello on stage before. What if I mess up and play a wrong note?”

“You think YOU have a reason to be nervous? I have to get up there and sing with Satchel Greenblatt, the meanest kid ever! And during the song, I have to pretend to love him! He thinks he’s so great, just because he’s the only kid in the entire school who doesn’t have a peanut allergy. Why did they choose me anyway? I look nothing like Ophelia Wayne-Newton of whoever she was...”

Aaron was watching the holographic television while he was on his b-phone.

“We now return to ‘Degrassi: The Preschool Years,’” said the announcer. On the television were two young children, a boy and a girl, coloring at a small table.

“Can I borrow your red crayon?” asked the boy. The girl was clearly hesitant to do what he asked.

“No you cannot, Ivan!” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re always mean to me!”

“Well maybe I’m mean to you because I like you!” said the boy. The girl gave a look of awe as the serious music started playing in the background. “Maybe you’re being mean to me because... you’re a stupid doo-doo head!”

The TV show really spoke to Aaron. He had to tell Delilah what was going through his mind.

“Delilah,” he said, “Has it ever occurred to you that Satchel is mean to you because he **LIKES** you?”

“Do you really think that?” asked Delilah, “If I liked somebody, I would be nice to them.”

It was the first week of November and it was just a little bit chillier outside. All the pumpkins were harvested, but you couldn't easily tell because our main character and his family were in the big city. Despite the weather, street performers were still entertaining the masses and street vendors were still selling warm pretzels at a reasonable price.

"We're almost there," said Elaine as she was leading her husband, son, and daughter to Carnegie Hall. Their monsters Sally the Nirangel (a deer-like angel monster), Lucia the jellyfish.midi, and Kelly the pelbo were with them. Aaron was finally getting a chance to see an official orchestra play at a high-class place and his monster was pretty high-class herself.

"I like wearing my ratty clothes better than wearing this suit," said Elaine's husband Jason, who worked as an auto mechanic.

"Quit your complaining, we've had these tickets for months."

The fancily-dressed McGuirk family took their seats on the balcony and away from the noisy city. Aaron was excited to feel this high up and the lights illuminating from the ceiling could only be compared to those of heaven. The entire room was abuzz with instruments tuning and people making small talk.



"I've wanted to go here all my life!" said Kelly the Pelbo.

"You're only three months old," said Aaron.

"That's how long I've wanted to go here!" The lights dimmed to let the audience know that the show was about to start. Projected on the wall above the stage was a friendly message: "Please take this time to turn off your b-phones and other robotic communication devices, thank you." The conductor, a relaxed man in his fifties, walked onstage with pomp and the audience clapped. After bowing to them, the man turned around and tapped his podium with his baton. This signaled the musicians to hold their instruments up and get ready to play. Aaron was still leaning over the side with his monster, too excited to sit down. The orchestra played their first piece, Gustav Holtz's "The Planets," with such gusto that it could be heard even in the nosebleeds.

"Aaron, sit in your seat," pestered Elaine.

The next day, Aaron was on the couch reading a book, since he enjoyed casual reading, as opposed to reading books that the teacher makes you read. All the while, he couldn't stop thinking about the performance he was going to give. Tomorrow night, he was to perform the cello in the music center's concert hall, except he didn't think he was