

THE CASTING OUT OF SPIRITS

Jeanine Eyre Bee

I don't know why they've asked someone else to play the organ.

I've been playing the organ in this ward for forty-eight years. When I first learned to play, I had to pump the air through the pipes with my feet on bellows, up and down, one and then the other. My calves rippled through my stockings like an Olympian. I played when I was placed on modified bed rest during my pregnancy with Ellie, and George had to push me up to the rostrum in a wheelchair and help me onto the bench. I played at George's funeral, when my fingers creaked with the beginnings of arthritis and tears blurred the notes on the page. But I walk into church today with my book of music, feeling better than I have in years, and what do I see? Little Julie Nielson sitting at the organ, fumbling her notes left and right.

I'm not one to make a scene. So, after the initial shock, I decide to sit in the front row so I can lock eyes with the bishop every time the Neilson girl plays a wrong note. But when I reach the pew, the force of habit takes over and I keep walking. Up the steps. To the organ.

I stand behind Julie for a while, watching her play. She isn't using the foot pedals. Most people don't these days. But there's a little button on the right-hand side that says "BASS CUPL," and if you toggle it, it takes the voice programming from the bass line and plays it in the lower half of the keyboard. So I try to be discreet. I sit down on the bench next to her and whisper, "You need to enable the bass coupler."

Of course, she can't hear me—the organ is far too loud for prelude music. So I push the button myself. She looks a little confused at the change but keeps her eyes on the music. Then, since this is sacrament meeting and not a Beatles concert, I lower the volume myself with the foot pedal.

It seems like everything is under control, so I stand up to leave. But then Julie starts playing “Called to Serve.” As prelude music. Can you believe it? With that bass line thumping along. Bum bum bum bum. It’s atrocious. “Be Thou Humble” is a much better prelude hymn. And in the key of C, she’s not likely to miss many notes.

So I turn the page. Julie stops playing and whips her head around. “What are you—”

She looks confused. Maybe I should be more sympathetic. It’s not her fault that someone mistakenly asked her to play the organ. So I try to smile. “I’m not here to take over for you. I’m just giving you a few pointers.”

Julie turns back to the hymn book. But she must realize that my song choice is better, because she starts plodding through “Be Thou Humble.”

I’m starting to head down to the pews when Bishop Clements stands up to begin the meeting. Julie stops playing (right in the middle of the verse with no resolution to the musical phrase or anything), so rather than call any undue attention to myself, I sit down in the choir seats next to the organ.

The opening hymn is “The Spirit of God.” I’m quite familiar with the song. I know that it should be played on the ninth preset with the 4’ Clarion and 8’ Dulciana voices added to the Great manual to really give the melody that great ringing emphasis during “We’ll sing, and we’ll shout!” It should feel jubilant! Alive!

When Julie starts playing on the fifth preset—one I use for the quieter sacrament hymns—I audibly groan.

Changing voices in the middle of a verse is not recommended, but I can’t stand to sit through one more measure of this, so I lean over and toggle the ninth preset. The sound blasts from the pipes, and Julie jumps a bit at the change. But everything is fine until the tempo starts to drag. I tap on the bench next to her, hoping to encourage her to play a bit faster. She doesn’t. And I know she can hear me because even the bishop glances back at the sound.

Finally, after four verses (and eight-and-a-half minutes), the song finishes. After the opening prayer, I decide I'm going to take over for Julie. After all, I'm perfectly capable of fulfilling my calling. I slide onto the bench to excuse her, but before I can say anything, the bishop stands up again.

"We have just one item of ward business. We'd like to recognize our new ward organist, Julie Nielson."

At this I'm so shocked that I stand up right there, my feet on the pedals, sending a great cacophony of bass notes ringing out across the chapel. I gather my wits quickly and sit back down. Bishop looks over his shoulder at Julie, who shrugs. But of course, I'm shocked! I was never released from this calling. I still have a stewardship over this organ and this congregation—or their ears, at least.

Bishop turns back to the congregation and clears his throat. "And we'd like to make you aware of the passing of Sister Eugenia Gordon. Funeral services will be held Friday."

I should be playing at that funeral.

"Sister Gordon shared her musical talents with us for the past forty years—"

It was forty-eight.

"—and I know it's not customary, but I think it would be appropriate for us to offer a vote of release, to thank her for her service on the organ. All those who wish to do so, please show by the uplifted hand."

The hands are all held high, like the great wall of pipes in the tabernacle. And I feel a smile creep up on me.

Because now I know it's time for me to leave. Let Julie have a turn on the keys.

But enough about me. Tell me about this place.

Do you need an organist?

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