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Three Weddings

I.

These things were reputed to have happened at a wedding in our district a few years ago. The bride came from one of the wealthy families established among us for over a century. Where the bridegroom came from, or who he was related to, I don't know, save that he was young, just out of law school and that (it was generally believed) a brilliant career lay ahead of him.

What is certain is that the town hall's ballroom had been rented for the celebration to follow the wedding ceremony. Reports state that the bride's father, a prominent banker, had stood, bursting with pride, at the front gate to greet each of the guests as they came into the driveway.

In spite of the large amount of hearsay, there is a general concurrence on the essentials: in the interval between the first and second courses, before all the soup plates had been collected and the main course about to be served, a band of roving musicians appeared at the front gates with an offer to provide music for the night's dancing. By all accounts these musicians comprised a motley assortment of displaced vagabond, both men and women. Included among them were gypsies, klezmers, tinkers, black jazz artists and buskers.

Clods of dirt from all the nations on Earth clung to their dilapidated shoes and boots. Their costuming, also, was exceedingly strange: comical hats, both large and small, hanks of fur stitched to their garments; waistcoats of several centuries vintage held together by belts, shoelaces or bits of string; ribbons and loose bits of fabric

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dangling every which way; parti-colored vests, breeches with rents , perruques and wigs, torn rags mixed together with costly satins and silks. Rare gems were sometimes to be seen sparkling within the clutter of cheap trinkets of plastic, paste, wire or glass . Everything they owned gave the impression of having been stolen. Their instrument cases lay heaped up in a farm cart that had been dragged through the mud and onto the lawn: 6 violins, 3 violas, 2 cellos, a bass, an oboe, flute, 2 clarinets, bassoon, bagpipes, saxophones, keyboards, guitars, a zither, a marimba and a great range of percussion. None of their instruments were electrified.

The bride's father intended to reject their offer. Hospitality required only that before sending them on their way they be invited to partake of a glass of brandy; it would have struck the guests as hard-hearted were he to do otherwise, given that the snows had fallen earlier than usual that year and the musicians were miserably poor and far from being adequately clothed for the weather.

Had not the bridegroom taken it upon himself to offer to pay them for one dance before leaving, they would no doubt have gone off and we would never have heard of them again. The over-powering effect made on the assembly by this superior, well-disciplined ensemble , all professionals, some of them unquestionably musicians of genius, stirred up a clamour in the hall that they be engaged on the spot. Finally the bride's father had to relent.

The contract was hurriedly drawn up and signed, and the tribe of rootless derelicts climbed onto the ballroom stage to begin arranging chairs and music stands in the semi-circular formation of an orchestra.

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This finished, they sat in silence, waiting for a signal from the conductor.

This came during the serving of the beverages and dessert. Once launched, it seemed that no force existed on earth able to control or contain their fury. The orchestra never rested and scarcely paused. The guests, drowsy with drink and bloated to satiety, rose staggering from the tables, to be drawn irresistibly into the dance. The music's wild sensuality acted on the reflexes of the dancers like whips on the backs of galloping horses. The melodies themselves were peculiar yet not unfamiliar, conforming to no known system of music, rather to some very ancient way of organizing sound, older perhaps than the races of musicians playing them. Laughter, song and dance persisted from one end of the ballroom to the other, from hour to hour, licking the walls and ceilings like the flames of a roaring bonfire until well into the night. Guttural cries rising above the din indicated drunkenness, coarse jests, oaths and threats, entanglements, sporadic fist-fights and other evidences of a growing dissipation.

Around the ballroom, the chandeliers careened wildly and with undeniable menace. Every light in the building flashed and flickered from the heavy stomping of feet. Collected around the building and standing in the snows were deer, squirrels, birds, and other small forest creatures, who peered into the rooms through windows rendered opaque by condensing steam. In their eyes glittered points of light that lost themselves within the carpet of stars stretching across the cloudless sky.

At the peak of the excitement the bride was seized, stripped of her gown and the rest of her clothing and dragged through the room onto

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the center of the floor. Now the revellers joined hands to form a dozen concentric rings around her. Circling in both directions they hurled obscenities upon her, combining spiteful taunts with unmistakable gestures. Horrified, the bride recognized her new husband among her loudest tormentors, his curses outdoing the others in ferocity.

The musicians paid not the least attention to anything happening around them, their muscles and nerves consumed, as within a destructive flame, by the music that rode them. Their luminous eyeballs, swollen and fixated, stared past the pages of their music to some malign power beyond the walls. They scarcely seemed to breathe, no sweat poured from their temples, their instruments groaning and reeling like drunk satyrs at an orgy.

Keeping time to the music's frenzied beat, his shoes twisting in the execution of quick and difficult steps, the bridegroom opened up a path through the rings of dancers towards the center of the floor. A crystal wineglass dangled from the fingers of his right hand, its purple nectar dribbling gout over the immaculate cuffs of his shirt, leaving stains, dark like the blood of a butchered stag. His cheeks, flushed with exertion, pulsed like living hearts in his weak, dissolute face. Beneath eyes overflowing with malice gleamed the tips of sadistic teeth.

Advancing upon his bride, now his wife, he extended the goblet in her direction. She took it from his hand; dumb with terror, she sipped at its rim. With an upswelling of rage he tore it back again from her hands, drained off the remnants of the wine, and shattered it on the ground. Fragments of glass lay crushed beneath his heel, the rest scattering about the floor. Seizing her paralyzed, shivering body, he inflicted cruel bites on the pallid flesh of her breasts.

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As if on cue, the festive community burst spontaneously into joyous song. Dissonant choruses of voices lifted to utterance of dimly recalled peasant lyrics outside all civilization, rooted in the old countryside. Scattered sounds of squalid couplings mingled with bestial grunts and cries of rape and incest.

On the instant the hellish orchestra ceased.

A sea of silence expanded in over-lapping waves from the innermost circle out to the far corners of the room. Slumped over their music stands, the corpses of the musicians looked as if they had never been meant to serve any function other than that of temporary habitation for the vanished demon horde. Neither bride nor bridegroom were anywhere to be seen.

Sobbing and shuddering, the circles of dancers edged gradually from the ballroom floor to rear up against the outer walls. There, at the center, where the bridal pair had stood now lay, split open from snout to rump, the stinking carcass of some vaguely identifiable savage beast, bear, wolf or boar. Through its exposed entrails, festering and hideous, crawled armies of vermin.

Sick with horror, the doomed mobs raced in panic through the opened doors of the hall. Yet: even from the moment of their crossing the threshold, there began their transformation into maggots, ants, spiders, cockroaches and other bugs, racing swiftly in every direction, losing themselves in cracks in the sidewalks and under the foundations of houses, down wells, the rest disappearing ultimately into the gaping mouths of huge flowers.

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II

Was it really only yesterday that Eric stepped out of his apartment with Sylvia, his lovely fiancée, for a walk through our town? After a stroll along the river, and a visit to an unfamiliar neighborhood, they returned via a different route. Coming into the downtown they passed a complex of public buildings, including the municipal theater.

Men, women and children were running out through the doors in mad panic, pushing and trampling one another; some could also be seen leaping from the upper windows. Together with their human owners came pets, howling cats and yelping dogs, their wet tongues slavering over hot foaming lips.

Sylvia wanted to run away, but Eric told her not to be afraid. When all was said and done, the spectacle was more amusing than frightening. He pointed out the irony in the plight of an audience that, having paid so much to get in, should now be rioting to get out! They sat down together by the curb, bent double with laughter, Sylvia cradled in Eric's arms.

A gang of skinheads seized Sylvia by the arms and dragged her away down the street into the public square. Eric jumped up and started after them in pursuit; that is, until he observed his own father charging out of the building, arms waving in frenzy, hair standing on end, his face twisted from having witnessed some spectacle of unspeakable horror; and entirely naked!!

Thus rendered helpless, Eric could do nothing but watch the savage gang-rape of his Sylvia by brutes, a mob of onlookers gathered around them, wrestling for the best locations for enjoying the entertainment.

As time went on the persons fleeing the building began to be transformed into the incredible shapes of impossible beasts: antelopes

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with speckled horns and golden hooves; bears with strawberry complexions, talons of eagles, lion's whiskers and manes ; goats with shaggy wolves' legs, horns curled up in vertical mollusk shell towers , cusped with sparkling jewels, their metastasizing mammaries harboring many suckling whelps ; hybrid creatures fashioned from the bloody limbs and organs of rabbits and dogs; long-legged crane-like bald-headed birds with long beaks like scythes, garlanded with multi-colored feathers jutting out from coats of mammalian fur.

A huge bull burst through the double doors. Swiveling its head like the cloud foam surrounding the eye of a hurricane, it lifted Eric's father up on the points of its horns and ran into the crowd, stamping and dancing about in diabolic rage. As spasms shot through Eric's body, his legs gave way beneath him. Yet as his father went into convulsions he had to rally. Averting his eyes he ran from the scene, the bull in full pursuit.

At the place where his Sylvia had been raped to extinction there remained only a black pool formed from hundreds of wriggling snakes. Sounds of wild organ music of psychotic propensities flooded out of the auditorium.

Looking back over his shoulder Eric saw the bull's hooves hammering away at the pool of snakes, scattering them in all directions, setting some on fire, the remainder crawling over its' sleek loins, curling about its' torso and neck until they reached Eric's hapless father, gasping for breath between hysterical screams. Later that evening he was either gored or poisoned to death.

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Eric had run a considerable distance by that time , falling into a swamp and metamorphosing to a white water lily crowned with black stamens.



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III.

At last! Everything was ready to begin; at last! In the vestibule at the back of the church stood the glad young couple. The flower girl chatted nervously with the bride, while the best man straightened the lapels of the bridegroom's tuxedo. Waiting for their arrival at the altar the jowled minister, soft hands folded over paunch, practiced his perennially happy hypocritical smile.

The organist, a wizened man bent double by the years, squirmed before the keys of his instrument. For some time he'd been waiting, with mounting impatience, for the signal from the minister to begin the Wedding March. Tangled hair, wirey and long, fell down his back, completely covering neck and shoulders. A pulp nose and bright-eyed stare of grim defiance waded within a face rendered repulsive by a mind nourished for decades on morbid obsessions and malevolent schemes.

If one is to judge from the noise level of their conversations and their shuffling about in the pews, it seems that the congregation had also grown restless. On this morning the church was filled to capacity, with relatives from both families, friends of their relatives and all their children, well wishers and friendly spectators from the outside. More than once, the minister had been compelled to call them to order more than once. Quiet was finally established only when the organist grazed the keyboard with his callused fingertips and music flooded the arches of the nave.

He played the Mendelssohn Wedding March with insistent malice, arhythmically, hitting many wrong keys, yet with a diabolical authority of touch that contrasted strangely with his eccentric performance. One was hard put to know how to deal with the situation. All in all, it was still

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the Wedding March, wasn't it? The bridal procession could, by making an effort, synchronize its steps to the familiar old refrain. As for the majority of the other guests, those who weren't tone deaf had never learned to appreciate great music. Ultimately it mattered little how he played.

The bright sunlight entering through stained-glass windows streamed over the heads of the congregation and all things in its wake, wrapping crucifixes, candlesticks and decorative sculpture in comforting glazes as, hand in hand the happy couple, he jolly and in high spirits, (though nervous and unconfident), she demure and modest, (blushing all the while), lurched down the aisle.

Suddenly it seemed as if the air resonated with witches howls, goblins' gibberings and the shrieks of ghouls. All hearts were gripped with panic as the music broke out in a hysterical cacophony, now devoid of all melody, harmony or form.

Pandemonium reigned through the church. The assembled multitude grabbed at anything within reach, coats, pocketbooks, umbrellas, cushions, hymnals, and hurled them at the procession. The noises coming from the organ amplified their din, the volume rising, in step with the satanic grin on the organist's hideous features, to drown out the prevailing mayhem.

Through the walls of the organ console and out of the pipes above the altar there flew swarms of bees, mosquitoes, flies, wasps and other winged insects that attacked the rioting crowd. The front doors were flung open and police brigades charged into the church. They rounded up and arrested the bride, bridegroom, flower girl, best man and all the wedding guests, not sparing the children .

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Thence to remove them to the public square, to this end: that, to the solemn religious incantation of the minister and the growling of the hurdy-gurdy played by the organist they might be executed, every last one of them.

