



THE HURRICANE PARTY

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That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a
lavender spray
Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here
to regret,
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has
never been opened.
And the way up is the way down, the way
forward is the way back.

T. S. Eliot

A Major Second

The power went out a few minutes before three in the afternoon. The sky filled with heavy rain clouds, and the whole city went dark.

Hanck Orn was sitting in his living room listening to the organ concert broadcast from the Cathedral. Then came the power outage. The subsequent silence and the darkness that followed first aroused annoyance and irritation, only to modulate immediately into another sort of darkness, which in a larger context would last far into the future, perhaps for the rest of his life.

He would later say as much to his few acquaintances. ‘My entire existence has gone dark.’ It sounded bombastic and pretentious, coming from him. But those who understood the nature of the circumstances were willing to overlook it.

The concert had been performed in the church for generations. Lately the notes had expressed a descending interval; those in the know speculated whether it might be moving towards a cadence and, if so, what it might portend. But even those amateurs who simply heard the notes were seized by the development and awaited the next tone with anxious anticipation, discussing and speculating. Peculiar systems for calculating the probable changes were touted at every book-making agency. Experts and interpreters who had predicted the right notes became famous and were considered oracles.

Hanck rarely participated in this form of gambling. The

notes themselves were enough for him. They could transmit a power that seemed beneficial, although he often wondered whether it was captivating or liberating or possibly both.

Regardless of how you look at the world, and no matter what you choose to call the powers that be, you can never ignore what is called the ‘magic of events’.

It’s part of the human equation, the rhythm of the heart, the pulse of the narrative, the way things take shape whenever a story begins; expectations are awakened and with them the sense that at some time the whole thing will have to come to an end.

He had been leaning back comfortably in an easy chair. The tone was the same as the last time he listened, several days earlier. A warm, pure note. It was a G.

A G that could peel away and push aside all those things that you otherwise went around thinking about, all the worry chafing in your subconscious, things that were talked about in the city, old ailments, new epidemics, money, the daily bread, and of course everything that a father might ponder with regard to a son, the dangers that await a boy in this world.

The tone was powerful, absolute, and soaring, clear and open. It could be speaking about anything at all. Or it might be saying nothing, if that was what you preferred. It was simply there, a solid pillar of sound, strong and stable enough to support the considerable weight of the listeners’ expectations.

One of the premises was that at any moment, at any time whatsoever, it could be replaced by another, either higher or lower tone; along with the memory of the old one it would express an interval, give a hint of a larger pattern, a thought, a narrative that was on its way somewhere, a movement which you could follow step by step.

There were people in the city who had lived a long life and who had listened to the organ as often as they could, and yet had missed each and every shift in tone. For his part, Hanck had ticked off quite a few. He could even associate a decisive event in his life with a certain interval: a major second.

Now, on this rainy day, no such thing took place. Yet he had remained sitting in that armchair for several hours, spellbound and absorbed. Maybe because nothing was happening.

Part of the nature of this magic is that it can erect boundaries, at times sharp and high and difficult to breach. Those affected may appear to be prisoners of the course of events.

It's a common experience for a person to find himself drawn into a development which even at an early stage points in an undesirable direction, perhaps straight to hell, and later, when the catastrophe becomes a fact, you remark: 'I could feel it from the very beginning . . .'

Now this may seem both comforting and gratifying, since most hells become tolerable whenever the person who has ended up there can say: 'What did I tell you?!

Entire cultures have vanished as the prisoners of events, marching in step towards their own downfall, as if blinded, turned towards another existence, absorbed in a vision of something other than what is at hand.

What is called human freedom has nothing to do with turning to magic to influence the forces of destiny; rather it's a matter of breaking the magic.

As in the case of misfortunes or deeds of valour, when physical and spiritual faculties are put to the test, a total sense of presence occurs, a state that may be regarded as alienating and in hindsight might be described in this way: 'It seemed totally unreal . . .'

Misfortunes are dated, assigned a precise place in time and space and preserved as distinct events until they've cooled and hardened and taken on a manageable form; then they're set out in a clearing where wind and weather wear away what is unique, leaching away the pain and making them less personal. Gradually they become incorporated into a larger expanse of experiences, where they allow themselves to be told as one story among all the others. What once broke the magic can now restore it.

The essence of the misfortune has been vanquished, art has altered the bookkeeping, entering a debit among the assets. The tragedy has lost its effect; it can be illuminating and instructive or may simply present an entertaining tale in the glow of the fire in the evening.

The misfortune that struck Hanck Orn does not need to be further specified in terms of time and space, or set aside to cool down and become manageable. From the very beginning it had already taken on features reminiscent of the classical tragedies.

He'd been having a good day up until three o'clock. It was largely like any other day, and he would later recall everything he had done, down to the smallest detail, the way people like to go over a series of events in the hope of finding an explanation or seeing some sort of meaning, and whether things could have been different, not as senseless.

His days usually started in the same way. As soon as he awoke and climbed out of bed, he would go over to the window facing the street and pull aside the curtain to get some idea of the weather. If the sun was shining he might open the window and stick out his head and look towards Vinterplatsen, where the big monitor displayed information about the current temperature and weather conditions.

When it was raining, on the other hand, he would get an idea of what sort of rain it was. Sometimes it was a risky business to stick out his head since a good deal of the precipitation, especially at the start of the rainy season, was downright harmful to the eyes.

He had a son. Every time he admonished the boy to protect himself from the sun or the rain, he could hear his own

mother's voice saying: 'Never go out bareheaded!' Her nagging had been just as fruitless as his own: 'So what's wrong with this hat, anyway?!' It seemed part of normal life to repeat such phrases of concern. That's how he preferred to view it, that it sounded equally persistent, that a certain feeling automatically found its expression, that it was the children who had once taught the adults what love is.

It was a fine and quiet drizzle that was falling on this occasion. The rainy season had been going on for a while, and the festivities that took place at the start of the season had given way to ordinary days of wetness.

Hanck Orn was not a particularly old man, yet he could still recall when the rain festivals in the city were no more than informal merrymaking at various locations staged by immigrants, mostly the second- and third-generation Flemish, who comically enough had come up with the idea of welcoming the rain.

Soon the celebration had grown, acquiring its own ceremonies, and by now it consisted of official holidays and festivities that were inaugurated by representatives of the Administration. Naturally that should have signalled an end to the fun when what was once spontaneous was taken over by those who believed that they represented the common good. But the power of the torrential rain was considerable, and it seemed to induce a resistance to attempts at taming or regulating anything.

People did precisely what they liked when the rain came, even though at first the downpours were filled with all manner of harmful substances. After a few days they became less dangerous, the layers of air were rinsed out, the city's dusty, dirty streets were flushed clean after many months of oppressive and stagnant heat. The rain brought with it a liberating freshness, a blessed resource. Pools and reservoirs were filled.

Everything could be washed. The power supply was secured.

For Hanck, the rainy season primarily meant irregular work schedules when he had to take the days as they came, an enforced freedom that his son might call 'laissez-faire', with a large dose of contempt. It was no doubt some sort of kitchen French for negligent behaviour.

His work consisted of repairing and selling machines. The humidity level indoors, inside his workshop, was often critical for a number of metals. They might look free of rust, but they seldom were. On this kind of day, when his antique hygrometer showed 99% relative humidity, he chose not to even open the door to his workshop. He didn't want to jeopardise the few machines he had left.

So he did what he usually did whenever there was nothing in particular to occupy his time: he walked round the flat and straightened up, putting his shoes in their proper place in the hall, hanging a coat on a hanger, making the beds.

He went into his son's room and picked up a few things here and there, cleaning up in a manner that he had developed over the years, meaning in a manner that wouldn't be discovered. He could continue in this way for quite a while before it would be noticed. The boy had a hard time keeping things tidy, except in the kitchen. He was a chef, and on the wall hung the diploma he had received after finishing culinary school. It hung between two old posters showing the cuts of meat on a steer, a pig and a sheep.

His son, Toby was his name, had undergone lengthy and thorough training without ever coming near a piece of meat. The posters on the wall portrayed something exciting, desirable and unobtainable. The sort of thing that all young men like to see on the wall.

The curtains in the room were usually kept closed. Toby worked far into the night, and during his hours off he mostly

lay in bed and slept. Hanck stood in the dim light with a cushion in his hand, a soft cushion from his own childhood home that Toby had appropriated. The cushion used to have an embroidered pattern on it, but it had been rubbed off. The fabric was worn shiny. The cushion stank. It had seen better days, but he didn't dare throw it out.

He stood there, irresolute, almost dejected. He still hadn't got used to the idea that the boy was grown up. It had happened so fast. The kid could take care of himself now. He earned more money than his father did, and had a bright future ahead of him. Hanck should be happy, and he tried to persuade himself that he was, but it was a peculiar kind of happiness. It could make him feel paralysed, especially in here, inside the boy's old room.

This cramped, messy, foul-smelling cubbyhole was like some sort of end station. He found himself in the midst of a leave-taking. Later, when he would think back on this day, he pictured himself standing there with a filthy cushion in his hand, preparing himself for a different leave-taking, one that was more final. But that may have been an invention of hindsight, a way of interpreting the magic that had held him there.

It can appear at any moment, both in great tragedies and in the most everyday activities, in all human endeavours. It can happen suddenly, with a glance, a gesture, an intonation, without the phrase 'Once upon a time . . .' ever being uttered.

Even trivial stories that never start out by mentioning any remarkable events and that may disclose an inglorious end at the very beginning arouse anticipation, as well as trepidation regarding the inevitable end. No one wants to live in a world that has lost its lustre.

A person's prospects for settling into his life depend on

how he chooses to relate to this magic, whether he learns to regard it in the right way and is then capable of adapting accordingly.

Whoever chooses to deny its power may get far in the world but risks being remembered as a prodigy who never found his proper place.

Hanck had found his proper place, at least during the past twenty years, at least until now, when he seemed to haul himself up from a deep pit in order to drop that filthy cushion on the floor and get himself out of that room.

His son was supposed to come home that evening and take a few days off. Hanck was looking forward to it. He caught himself imagining all the things they would do together; things that, as soon as he became aware of them, made him feel ridiculous.

He knew in advance that nothing would ever come of it. He no longer had much to offer.