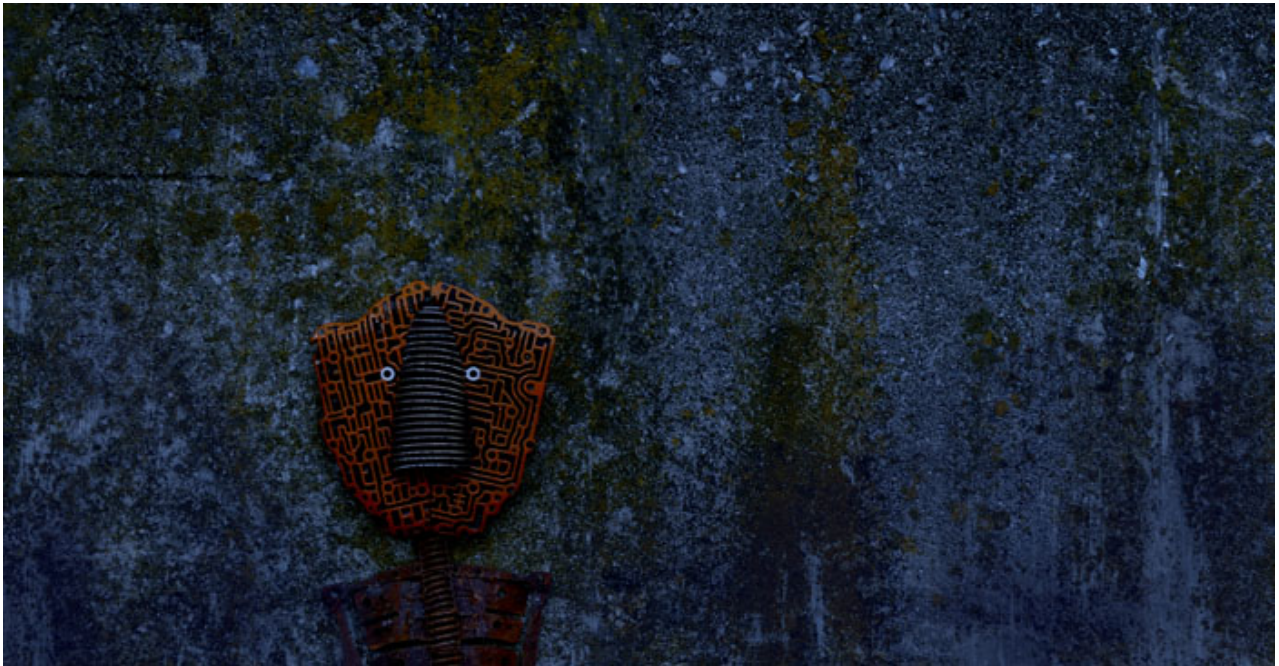


SHORT STORY

# The Mephisto Waltz

by Richard M. Cho



"Starry Night" by Jeff Mann

I am a concert pianist.

Or, I should say, I *was* a concert pianist. My right wrist now ends in a stump, which is an obstacle even my prodigious talent cannot overcome.

Margaret and I had been married for five years when the “accident,” as my wife frames it, happened. I’d like to think in terms of “sacrifice,” a willful renunciation necessary for any transcendental act of love. In our case, that “sacrifice” ensured the safekeep of our marriage, the landscape with many fault lines prone to earthquake. I guess the same can be said for any marriage.

Barely at the age of thirty, I was a prominent figure in the world of classical music, and I take sinister pleasure in imagining the shocked reactions of my fans and colleagues as they absorbed the news that I’d hacked my hand off. I cannot say I blame them. My fingers vindicated my existence. Over the past quarter century, they spent countless hours daily crisscrossing those eighty-eight precious black and white keys. Losing such vital tools — or, rather, discarding them — would hardly make sense to the outside observer. But certain things should be done for greater good.

One day about a year ago, (the distant past when both my hands were whole) my wife was late from work. She had notified me earlier of the promotion party, but that didn’t keep me from prowling restlessly in our house while the image of her sleek colleagues flattering her nagged me. Although she had urged me to come along quite a few times, I declined, reminding her of my upcoming concert at Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Knowing I can't sleep until she gets home, I sat down once again at the Steinway & Sons grand piano, the sole occupant of our living room, the one with whom I was eternally entwined in a love-hate relationship, and set the metronome to tick away. I had already practiced several hours that day, had felt the pain encroaching on my back and wrists, so I was mostly noodling, interrupted by sporadic impulses to play Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No. 17 in D-minor*, better known as “The Tempest” sonata, the piece I had been thinking of playing during the encore. It was nearly eleven when my phone jingled, a text from Margaret asking how I was. I texted back that I was fine.

*But my back hurts*

*Stop practicing and go to sleep*

I waited, but no additional dialogue bubble materialized on the screen. No sooner had I tossed the phone face down on the music rack and restarted “The Tempest” than the phone jingled once again.

*I miss you, I wish you were here*

I considered joining her but soon gave up the idea as I loathed her snobby colleagues. I resumed my practice. Right when my fingers guided the adagio into the final cadenza of the first movement, my phone jingled again. This time, the text was from a friend asking me to drive up to Hollywood to join him and his gang. An address, then a picture of four guys with crimson, playful faces scrolled up on the screen.

Thinking back, it was foolish to yield to this temptation, but I needed something to calm my jitters. I suffered terribly from stage fright during my early years, and I still got ensnared easily by my nerves. I figured a shot or two of hard liquor would level my mind.

My friends were drinking in a cavernous bar so dark I could barely make out anything beyond my arm's length. The musty smell injected with a strong scent of weed nauseated me, and my classically trained ears suffered the dizzying beats of electronic music suffocating the space. I immediately regretted driving out here. I was typing a text to Margaret when I was bumped from behind, and my phone flew from my grip before I could press "send." A young woman had slammed against my back, and she staggered toward the exit without any hint of apology, laughing hysterically. I dropped to my hands and knees in the dark and made a frantic search across the clammy concrete, until I found my phone in a puddle of spilled beer. Cursing my buddies under my breath for inviting me, I slipped out of the bar and drove home. Margaret still hadn't come home, and I fell asleep.

The next day, I woke to my wife's urging, and even in the purgatory between the real and the dream I could sense the tweaked cadence of her voice. Eyeing me with grim concentration, she tossed me the white shirt I'd discarded on the floor. "Sorry, I should've put it in the hamper," I said.

"No, that's not it." She snatched the shirt from my hand and brought it to her nose. "I thought you were practicing piano last night. I know you don't smoke weed. And your phone's all sticky."

I stuttered, "I went out for a minute, when Henry texted, and..."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going out?" she asked incredulously, shaking her head. "I so wanted you to come to my party, but you went out with your friends instead, without even telling me?"

All I could offer as an excuse was a sigh.

She sulked throughout the day, her mood exacerbated by her hangover. Later, she came to me as I was shaving in the bathroom, half my face lathered. Her eyes, pooling with hurt,

peered at mine in the mist of the mirror.

“I thought we promised not to have any secrets from each other,” she said.

I knew that she reminded me of our past promises whenever she was ready to reconcile, and I seized the moment.

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On our wedding day, Margaret’s guest list comprised lawyers, doctors, and businessmen, whereas mine included musicians and writers, many still aspiring. No artistic sensibility was needed to perceive that her parents would never like me. I still remember their confused look when I told them I play piano for a living. “No, not your hobby, your profession,” her father pressed. They eventually came around to honor their daughter's choice, and we exchanged our rings and vows.

On our honeymoon to Europe, we made a detour to visit the Fryderyk Chopin Museum in Warsaw. We walked through the halls, which were richly endowed with Pompeiian-style frescoes and plafonds. Mallorcan pianos made by legendary builders such as Erard and Pleyel — including one with a mahogany veneer on which Chopin is said to have composed his preludes and études — lined the ornate space. We marveled at Chopin’s hand-written manuscripts, notes, and letters to George Sand. Margaret and I conversed about their relationship, how they’d never been legally married. I privately mulled over Chopin’s decision to avoid marriage, a sure obstacle, he would have figured, to his devotion to art.

On our final night, we went to a bar near the hotel. We consumed alcohol as if it was our last night on earth, but our elated mood allowed us to float just above the sea of inebriation, its waves splashing over our feet to give us jolts of pleasure. Our lips found one another every time our conversation halted for more than a few seconds, and we heartily debated whether our lovemaking that night should be utilitarian, epicurean, or hedonistic and what the physical and emotional consequences of those three approaches would be. Our raucous laughter turned a few heads around.

Then I noticed an upright piano in the corner; I stood up and stumbled toward it, sat down and played a scale. The piano was horribly out of tune. Nonetheless, I plunged into Liszt's *The Mephisto Waltz* in my drunken state. I had chosen a piece that was, as I would play it, about thirteen minutes long. No one except Margaret seemed to be paying attention.

When I sat back down, she looked perplexed.

“Why did you play that?” she asked. “I'd think that'd be the last piece on your mind for the occasion.”

In a swell of romantic fervor, the last notes of the piece still resonating in the darkest corners of me, I took her hand. “I’d sell my soul to the Devil if I could spend an eternity with you.” For a moment, we fell in somber silence for the weight of such a statement, but soon doubled over in laughter.

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Selling one's soul, what does that mean? Beyond its metaphorical use, what would it look like in reality?

After we returned to the States, we channeled all our energy toward chasing after our own idea of success, she as a litigator and I as a concert pianist. As time went by, I hit a few lucky strokes, met the right people, and garnered raving reviews from critics. I made recording deals with the infamous *Deutsche Gramophone* and secured myself several world tours, playing and reinterpreting the music of the romantic virtuosos early in my career, but gradually ripening into a virtuoso myself when I began to focus more on modern composers such as Schoenberg and Webern. I wished to master what I would term “pure music,” rejecting any social and cultural dictates in our taste. As demand for my performances increased, Margaret and I spent more and more nights in separate beds. Although many musicians on the road succumb to the allure of sexual escapades, I never did. My contact with female fans, no matter how obsequious, never went further than a handshake.

And I wasn't the only one scaling a cliff. It was just that Margaret's ascent was silent while mine was with fanfare. She made her mark winning cases against impossible odds with her disarming, verbal dexterity — she was what others might call “an iron hand in a velvet glove” — and her peers and seniors noticed. But somehow her accomplishments seemed insignificant compared to mine. This obsession with social respectability in the eyes of strangers was sometimes the cause of our marital conflicts. To give us a bit of rest, we sought after a viable mutual hobby and settled on gardening. We bought spades and pruning shears, even a cute wheelbarrow and a small ax (or was it a hatchet?), but we found ourselves getting anxious tending to soils, looking like dirty children occupied with mindless digging, wasting time away. One day, I sat down on the piano in the living room when she was hoeing outside and that was that.

Throughout those years, I suffered from serious back pains common to pianists. This compromised our nightly activities, and my wife had to straddle me as I lay flat, stationary. She was careful not to apply too much pressure to my core, gearing her weight toward my thighs as she went about her insistent movements, sweet-talking all the while, asking now and then if my back was okay in a tense whisper. At moments like this, I felt everything will be fine. We often complained about the lack of support from each other, but marriage is but

two different keys producing a discordant yet controlled harmony that involves frequent improvisation and syncopation to tender its sound, and like any great live performance it entails risk, which ultimately makes it exciting.

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A fortnight after Margaret's promotion party, I performed Alban Berg's Sonata, Op. 1, Webern's Variations, Op. 27, and Schoenberg's several piano pieces at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. I loved playing atonal pieces, how the melodies — or the lack of melodies — produced by a dissonant counterpoint enrapture and alienate listeners simultaneously, the twelve-tone technique like a demonic rendition of human experiences in musical expression in its purest form. Sitting at the keys, I allowed my fingers to attain a life of their own, a life full of colors and dynamics. I let the Devil take control, as it were. The main program seemed to be over in an instant — the sensation I got when my performance was top-notch — and I returned to the stage for an encore. Playing an unusually long encore was a habit I had formed to benumb my stage fright and, as planned, I graced the audience with all three movements of Beethoven's "Tempest" sonata.

I stood up after the last note had faded into silence, and the audience rose to give gentle yet approving applause. After my final bow, I looked to the seat where Margaret had been sitting and found it empty.

Backstage, I approached her brusquely. Her face flushed, she hugged me. I pressed my mouth against her ear.

"Where were you?"

She pulled away and tilted her head. "I was watching you all along. I got an urgent email I had to reply to. I thought you'd play only the third movement. So I walked away to finish some work."

"You're not supposed to walk away during the performance," I hissed. "It nags people."

"It nags them, or it nags you?"

On the way home in the car, our bickering escalated.

"Why do I get the feeling that your career demands the sacrifice of mine?" she said.

"Don't call what I'm doing a *career*. *Career* is for people like your colleagues, who are nothing but products of a neoliberal society that values money over everything else."

"Oh, really? Does that include me? So you think I value money over everything?"

“You don’t go out during the middle of a concert to send someone an email, especially if it’s your husband’s performance. It clearly shows how your *career* as a lawyer is affecting your priorities.”

“How can you say such things to me? Do you think I like my husband being away for half the year? I get lonely when you’re gone that long, but I work hard and it helps. I never complain because I respect your ambition.”

“I don’t know why, but your use of words like *career* or *ambition* ticks me off. Those words really demean my art.”

The next night, when she was asleep, I opened her laptop and skimmed through her email inbox, all her personal and professional accounts. The passwords were auto-saved, and one email in particular stopped my scanning. It was sent by someone named Craig the day after her promotion party. According to the email domain he was a colleague. To the best of my memory, it said:

*Dear Gretchen, I’m truly sorry for what happened. I admit that I was totally out of line. I hope you can forgive me. I guess I can only blame the alcohol. I really outdid myself that night.*

*P.S.: Congratulations on your promotion once again. You’re like my boss now, ha-ha.*

Why was this guy calling my wife *Gretchen*? As if it was a nickname lovers give to each other. Margaret hadn’t replied to Craig’s email. The email she had sent during my concert indeed turned out to be a contract letter to a client, whose original message included quite a few underlined words and exclamation marks. I felt dizzy. She had accused me of lying when she smelled weed on my shirt, and yet she was the one who had a man sending her a suspicious email. When I turned toward the bed, I noticed that her eyes were open, reflecting the silvery light emanating from the laptop screen.

“Aren’t you the one who said we should have no secrets from each other?” I boomed as I strode toward the bed as if ready to attack her. I was already too livid to slow my tirade.

“And who is Craig? What’s he talking about in the email? What happened at the party? And why is he calling you Gretchen?”

“What’re you doing? Why are you going through my email?”

“Answer me first!”

She was silent for a moment and sat up in bed. “He made a move on me at the party and I slapped him.”

“He made a move on you? What kind of move? A dance move?”

“Oh, don’t be silly. You know what I’m talking about.”

“Tell me exactly what happened because I *do not* know.”

“It was sudden. We were dancing, and he grabbed my shoulders and kissed me, or tried to kiss me. But I slapped him right away. I swear nothing happened. As you can see from the email, he apologized and...”

“And the name? Gretchen?”

“Everyone calls me by that name at work. There was a stupid joke and it got stuck.”

“Quit your job.”

“What?”

“Just quit that shitty job. Then you can tag along whenever I go on tour. You complain that we’re so often apart. Quit the job. Problem solved.”

“But I work so hard. I’m a partner now. I can’t just quit my job because someone tried to kiss me at work. Besides, it’s partly your fault too. If you had only come to the party when I asked you...”

Her face reddened and her eyes widened as she tried to defend and deflect my accusation. In fury, I snatched the pillow from the bed and retreated to the living room.

After that fight, we avoided being in close proximity. Her rebuttal against the nature of the email failed (despite her being a successful lawyer), and I couldn’t help imagining the worst scenario. The resulting agitation, of course, affected my piano practice. It drove me crazy. My European tour was around the corner, and I had selected the most demanding pieces — all by Schoenberg, including his devilishly difficult Piano Concerto, Op. 42. I hoped the Austrian virtuoso would be for me what Bach was for Glenn Gould.

I thought of our honeymoon days and recalled how often we spoke the word *forever*. *Forever*, we promised. It had only been five years, and we were already headed down the same worn path trodden by other married couples. I considered myself — *I still* consider myself — a first-rate artist, and I valued the romantic disposition bestowed on me by years of playing Chopin and Liszt. People say that a fight between spouses is like trying to cut a basinful of water with a knife; you achieve nothing while getting frustrated and tired. So I decided to purchase a bouquet of exotic flowers, visit her at work, and apologize amidst the prying eyes of her colleagues.

The firm was located on the thirteenth floor of a resplendent building whose pristine windows gleamed with fierce sunlight. I took the elevator up and found the office’s dark oak

doors near the end of the hall. I realized then that this was the first time I'd come here. Had I really never visited my wife at work before? I thought. The receptionist greeted me and asked if I had an appointment. Remembering Margaret saying that everyone called her Gretchen at work, I said, "I'm here to see Gretchen."

"Gretchen?" The receptionist's eyebrows hitched up, and when I was about to elaborate, thinking she must be new, I caught sight of Margaret sitting in a glass-walled meeting room behind the reception desk. I could only see the back of her head, as the rest of her was hidden by the backrest of a gigantic leather chair, but I recognized her instantly. I leaned slightly to get a better look and saw four men sitting around the table with her. As she spoke, their eyes lay upon her with the duplicitous concentration of a snake trying to charm its prey while it waits for the right moment to attack.

Any one of those four guys could have been Craig. These men, with their broad shoulders, hair meticulously combed, in Tom Ford suits, held the blunt posture of the self-assured. I was surprised to find myself succumbing to the same physical reactions I had experienced from stage fright. My heart palpitated, hands sweating. I was alone on the stage, insufferably bungling notes. I took a deep breath, but the only way out of this nightmare was to get off the stage, so I ran out, tossing the bouquet into the nearest trashcan.

To this day, Margaret is still in the dark about this blunder. Apparently, the receptionist was too dumb to figure out that I was her husband, or for whatever reason, she didn't tell her about my aborted visit. In retrospect, I was stunned by the aura emanating from her professional identity. Although I immediately recognized the back of her head, I also didn't recognize her at all, if that makes any sense. That couldn't have been my wife sitting there with those four men.

From then on, I was anxious whenever she was at work. I couldn't escape from the thought that however much we professed love for one another, we were ultimately strangers. With my European tour coming up, the anxiety morphed into angst, and my practice faltered terribly. The tour would surely end up an utter failure and annihilate my reputation. Throughout this phase, she kept to herself and seemed to be waiting, but even her patience got on my nerves.

One evening, Margaret returned home from work and found me practicing. She sat down next to me on the narrow piano bench. Silence bloomed around us. She let out a sigh and lay her head on my shoulder.

"I need to practice!" I spat.

She jumped up and hurled her handbag into the opened cover of the piano and it landed on the treble strings inside, producing a thud of jumbled notes. “You’re the one who needs to quit your work, not me!” she screamed.

Having devoted a quarter century to mastering and retaining hundreds of pieces in my repertoire, I couldn’t believe she would even harbor such a thought. Jagged memories flashed through my mind. Sounds, images, aches broke free from my subconscious and cut like shards of glass. Through the painful dissonance, a thought emerged with the fraught certainty of a single note held long past the others. I would prove the deep difference between us. I would demonstrate that I was the one willing to quit my *career* to revive the love of our past. That of the two of us, I was the only one who truly knew the meaning of *devotion*.

“I’ll quit the piano,” I said. “For us, I’ll quit the piano for good.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, you’re just saying that!”

“I’ll prove it. I’ll prove that I’m willing to give up anything, absolutely everything for our relationship.”

“You’re full of shit,” she said. I believe now that her words stemmed more from her frustration than from her heart.

At this point, my memory is again in disarray. I think I ran out to our backyard and grabbed the hatchet. Margaret chased after me. I can see myself holding the blade in my hand. At that moment, I believe, I thought: Our marriage is pure, like Schoenberg’s music; I’m the true romantic, like Goethe’s *Young Werther*. The upcoming tour would be a flop. Did I secretly hate playing piano? Secret to whom? These thoughts whirled within me, and I like to think that my wife, at that last horrible moment, finally glimpsed the flash of determination in my eyes. I remembered the conversation of our honeymoon days, of the haphazard, drunken performance of my favorite Liszt piece, *The Mephisto Waltz*, in a piano bar. I fell to my knees and extended my hand to the concrete ground. Then I slammed the hatchet down.

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Now, I spend my days transcribing music, mostly orchestra pieces for piano four hands duets. I dream often, and in those dreams, I still have ten fingers. I play Chopin and Schoenberg, and Margaret’s smile tells me that she’s proud of me. And that is enough. My performance will not stop.