

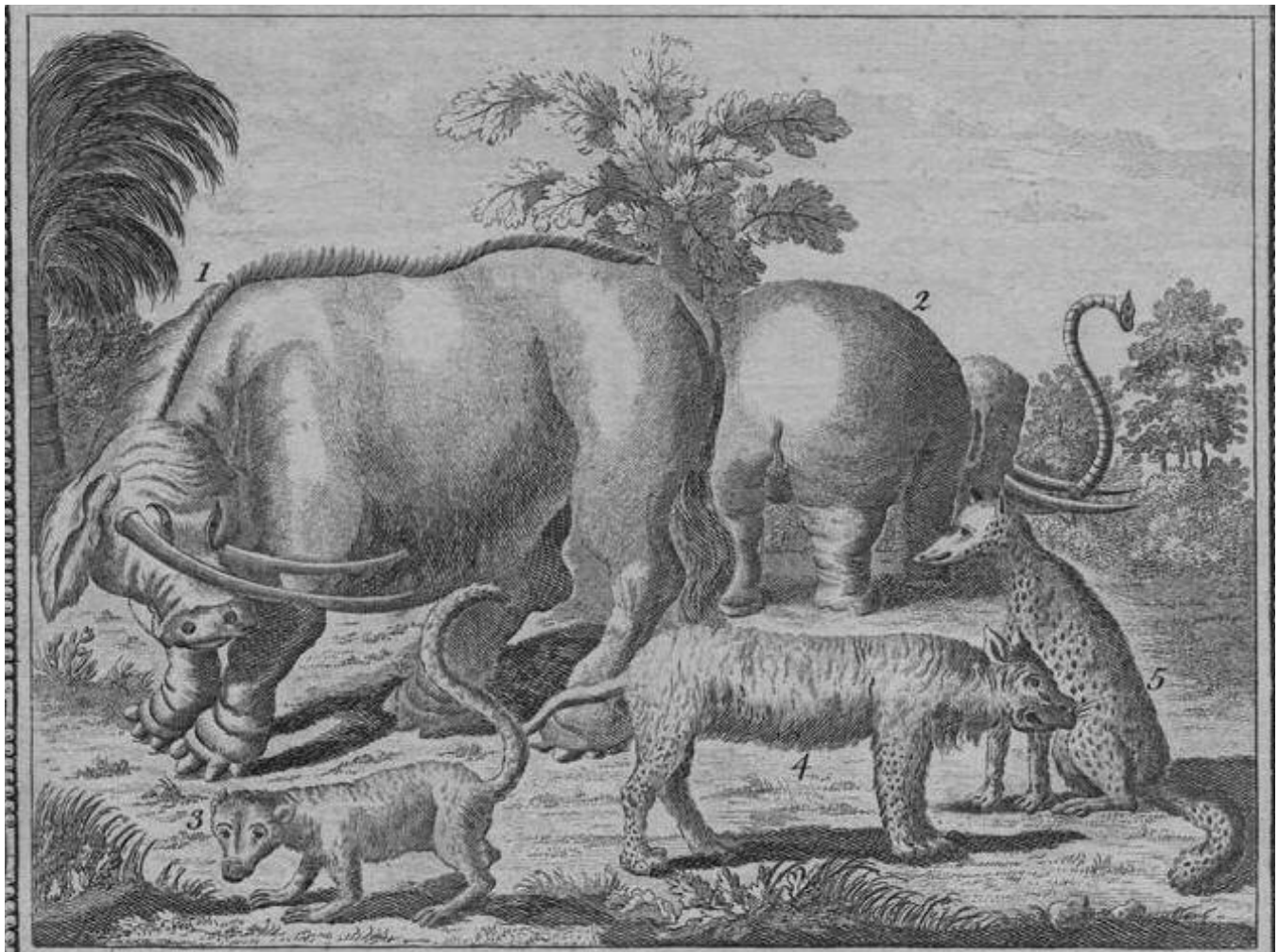
Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – THE CARNIVAL AT MIDNIGHT by Mario Lowther. Mr. Lowther writes, “Besides Corner Bar Magazine, my short genre and literary fiction has appeared in *Necrotic Tissue*, *Imaginarium*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Mystic Signals*, *Remarkable Doorways*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Abstract Jam*, and *Polar Borealis*, is forthcoming in *Books 'n' Pieces*, and has been a Glimmer Train New Writers top 25 finalist.”

Page 13 – MCLEAN BOYS AND THE WILD ALEX HARE by Melodie Corrigan. Ms Corrigan is an eclectic Canadian writer who has recently been published in *Blue Lake Review*, *S/tick*, *The Dirty Pool*, *The Write Time at the Write Place*, *Greensilk Journal*, and *Corner Bar Magazine* (www.melodiecorrigan.com)

Page 16 – THE TALE WHOSE END CAN NEVER BE TOLD by Flora Jardine. Ms Jardine writes fiction and creative nonfiction in Victoria, BC, Canada.



“THE CARNIVAL AT MIDNIGHT”

by MARIO LOWTHER

A white cross, silhouetted black against a flaming sun in a perfect blue sky. The church, modern, urban, big money, egg-shell walls, flesh-tone doors and trim, baking in the heat like block ice on a grill. A steaming asphalt parking lot lined with knee-high ornamental picket fences and flower beds ablaze with color. And two sport utility vehicles, one mid-size, one monstrous, careening in from the street in full roar, scorched tires spewing smoke, circling, screeching to a heart-lurching stop, two dogs in stand-off glaring and snarling.

The passenger door of the smaller SUV flies open and Carlos charges out. His jeans and leather jacket were new once. He's sick-looking, slightly hunched, wears a thin black mustache and a thick gray mullet, is old beyond his years like a middleweight too hooked to hang 'em up.

There's fury in his eyes and he shakes his fist as he marches up to the twice-as-big truck. "Fucker, what's the matter with you, huh? Why you attacking us? Why you following us here?"

Carlos screeches to his own heart-lurching stop as the other vehicle door swings open and the driver emerges. He must be seven feet tall, with shoulders like bridge

supports and arms like wrecking balls. His brush cut is radiant orange, his expression grinning, ravenous malevolence.

Carlos holds out his hands. "Whoa, this isn't necessary... Hey, wait a second!"

A brick-hard, six-fingered fist fills his eyes. Carlos sails ten feet, lands cheek-down, an archipelago of his teeth lying on the asphalt before him. His jaw is crooked, his face is wet, and a gaudy trail of his blood splatters the white picket fence and yellow-faced daisies. He coughs up red phlegm, and the shock and fear that nothing will be the same again brings tears to his eyes.

"Stop, please, you've got the wrong guy..." Carlos groans as a huge black boot kicks him square in the chest, bouncing him like litter. Before he can stop rolling, another kick propels him further, to within a few feet of the smaller SUV. The driver, a sharp-dressed boy in his late teens with pop idol looks, gapes through the open passenger door in helpless terror. Thinking twice, he reaches out, seemingly entreating Carlos to take wing back into the vehicle to safety.

Carlos can't fathom the number of broken bones he has. "Go! Go!" he chokes,

limply waving the boy away with a palm scratched raw by the pavement. "Save yourself!"

The boy hesitates. Summoning the last of his spirit, Carlos screams just go, you stupid shit, leave me. Panicked as if by a beseeching tone he's never heard before, the boy hits the gas. The front wheels lift, the door slams shut and the SUV speeds from sight, squealing tires fading.

Distant noon hour bells begin to chime, and Carlos is happy, he's content the boy is safe and he appreciates the final irony. "God save me," he laughs, and he rolls over to meet the black boot coming straight for between his eyes.

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Precisely eleven hours and six minutes later, a sub-demon of innumerable guises and names, who for reasons of fey vanity chooses at this time to address himself as Mr. Pritchard, nods and with a benign smile upon his hoary face inquires of Carlos again: "So...do you want to get him back?"

Carlos gazes out over a landscape without a horizon. "I've been forsaken," he murmurs. "I'm doomed." Below him stretches a pit, as deep as a canyon and as long as forever, its jagged precipices bathed in hues of golden yellow and burning red. Countless souls in torment wallow there in cruelty and torture, pain and brutality, guarded by huge, grotesque humanoids. Amidst this churning, writhing mass of

inhumanity a staircase of solid gleaming gold extends. After a moment, a naked, shredded figure with a blissful look emerges glowing from the pandemonium and begins to climb. By the time he reaches the top of the stairs his wounds have healed, and he joins a line of souls that winds endlessly over the topography and almost imperceptibly takes a collective step forward towards a faraway ball of light.

"This is Hell," says Carlos.

Mr. Pritchard's toadstool-fat face bubbles and ripples, his cheeks swelling and receding. A razor-sharp claw slices a line under his left eye, comes out and flails at the poisonous air, is sucked back in by a parting of Pritchard's black lips. "No," the sub-demon says, "this is Hope."

"The nether regions," Carlos shudders, in a daze. He points to a lake of stinking, molten excrement in which couples stand knee deep flaying each other skinless with spiked whips, and a meadow of holes roofed with barbed wire from which gory, screaming souls leap up and hang before being embraced by thick-clawed paws and wrenched below again. "What was their sin?"

"Failed relationships, and animal cruelty," Mr. Pritchard replies. Several mouths form in his cheeks, wail piteously, then vanish as if re-captured. Something many-legged lumbers across his forehead, bulging beneath the parchment of his skin and obliging him to frown in endurance.

“Minor transgressions, when one considers the bigger picture. We’re extremely moral here.”

“There’s no hope here!” Carlos cries. “I was going to repent! That’s where I was going! But I didn’t have time!” As the full weight of realization hits him, he drops to his knees before Mr. Pritchard’s black robes, clasps his hands and in anger demands mercy, forbids he be sent to the pit, and forbids he be condemned to somewhere else, lower down, somewhere much worse.

Bored, Mr. Pritchard smooths his calf-length, bottomless-well black hair then commits a rapid act of red-hot self-gratification, mindful to miss Carlos. By a stroke of luck, a sudden rush of heat from the pit instead blows it onto the sub-demon’s face, plastering him with smoldering rotten phlegm. Tasting it, and finding it pleasant, Pritchard peels it away as though a mask and conceals it within his robes for later.

Carlos glares at him in helpless fury. A face-full of equally abject eyes materializes and glares back indignantly, before they’re ingested like beetles by quicksand and the sub-demon genuflects an apology. “Yes, you were being ushered to a place where you had a reason at last to repent for the myriad errors of your ways. Then the unforeseen happened. Look down there.”

A cloud of putrid smoke belches up from the pit, making Carlos recoil. He wipes sweat away from his lips, and gives

Mr. Pritchard a long, sceptical scan before peeking over the edge.

“At the revolving boiling waterfall of souls arriving too late to save themselves?”

“Guarding it.”

The creature leisurely harpooning red-boiled, pleading unfortunates dog-paddling for the water’s edge and pitching them back into the maelstrom must be seven feet tall, with shoulders like bridge supports, arms like wrecking balls, and a radiant orange brush cut. His expression is grinning, ravenous malevolence.

“Fuckerrr!!” Carlos rails, eyes bulging like tumors, and he launches himself into the pit.

The nail of Mr. Pritchard’s forefinger extends and spears Carlos between the shoulder blades, spread-eagling and paralyzing him. Where the nail enters the skin boils as if stew on a stove. The air goes out of Carlos. He hangs suspended in mid-air, his face contorted, gasping “Uhn! Uhn! Uhn! Uhn! Uhn! Uhn!” in unrelieved anguish.

Meanwhile, a many-winged, long-legged, big-breasted insect with a voluptuous naked figure and the face of a wolf spider dives down and begins buzzing about Pritchard’s eyes. It swoops around back of his head. His eyes follow, rotating in their sockets, revealing souls in his pupils wallowing in fires of agony. As the she-bug circles for another orbit, a talon springs from Pritchard’s ear to hungrily snap it inside,

his earlobes flapping and making lip-smacking sounds.

The sub-demon re-focusses on Carlos, his fingernail retracting, reeling Carlos in. “You had your whole life to repent,” he says evenly, face to florid face. “Yet you cannot comprehend what it entails. So let us begin. The being that brought you here is not the one below you would foolishly confront. That being is a Secutor, an adjutant, a securer of souls whose time is due.”

Between jolting spasms, Carlos blurts, “But there was...repentance...in my heart...”

“You were unrepentant and no minor transgressor. You were destined for below.”

“It took me...it took me...before I...could repent...that was...unmerciful...”

“Only in the sense that it indicates your ignorance of the alternatives.”

Carlos bares his teeth. “I am...telling you...it brought me here...in error...”



Impressed, Mr. Pritchard unfolds his own foot-long, gore-dripping fangs. “Well, of course it did, you poor man. The Secutor wasn’t after you. It was after your son...”

“My son?!”

With a flourish, Pritchard releases Carlos, dropping him panting to the ground. His eyes tear up out of gratitude to be free of such unimaginable pain and in fear of contemplating worse. And shock makes him rise. He coughs, drives his fist against the earth and struggles to all-fours. Mr. Pritchard, belying an expression of genuine humanity, begins to circle Carlos, leaving a trail of fire, the flames dancing.

“Yes, your son,” says the sub-demon, “who accompanied you and who you hoped would follow your lurid example by repenting his own petty indiscretions. Your son, the only being you ever loved besides yourself, who followed your loss by regrettably abandoning hope, who is now preparing to sacrifice himself to ultimate sin. I’m afraid when the Secutor finds him, there’s but one place he will go, and that will be down. Far, far down into the deeps and the dark forever.”

The circle of fire constricts, begins to close in on Carlos. Tendrils of flame dart out and poke at him, trying for him. He spins away, then round and round like a clock dial, clutching at his throat, the heat attempting to reach in. “What do you mean finds?” he cries.

As if echoing his fear, the blaze rings out in a mournful wail, which pitches in volume as Mr. Pritchard’s billowing black robes fan the conflagration. “I should’ve forgiven the Secutor for its misdeed,” he frowns. “But I succumbed to anger, and in its shame the Secutor disobeyed me. Rather than remain here for us to suffer together, it has gone back for your son. It thinks that will help it, but my poor example has misguided it. That doesn’t matter. The Secutor will find your son, and when he does, that will be the end, and it will not go easily for him as it has for you.”

“You leave Ronaldo out of this! Don’t you touch my boy!” Carlos roars. A searing flare parts his lips and plunges in like a crimson phallus. Gagging, Carlos wrests the thrashing thing out with both hands and begins strangling it, the skin of his knuckles bubbling, his fingernails blackening. “I was going to repent! You know it! You’re trying to trick me into going below...”

“As you wish, then. You’re here now, and this moral place is all about rules.” Pritchard casually admires Carlos’s fortitude as the fire bites off one of his fingers, then the raw, red skin of another peels back, exposing white bone. “You may remain here as you are while the Secutor finds your son and takes him below. Or you take the more difficult path and attempt to intercede for good. The choice is, and is always, only yours.”

Choice, Carlos wonders, what choice! “Why should I believe you?” he demands

through gnashed teeth. “You conceal what’ll happen if I fail. My son and I, we’ll both go below, that’s the truth, isn’t it? I’ll condemn him forever.” He tightens his grip on the flame. Like a burning snake it whips about, howling and snarling. Its every movement electrifies Carlos with pain but he doesn’t dare let go, and he finds himself sustained as if somehow his physical endurance has been increased for the express purpose of mastering a truly unbearable threshold of self-torture. Before his eyes, his missing finger reappears, his peeling skin heals itself - only now his hands start to melt. And in desperation, he realizes the horrifying burden that will be his never-ending appreciation of torment. Tearfully, Carlos looks up at Mr. Pritchard, and pleads: “Help me...”

Thunder crashes as though the heavy black sky is finally freed of anticipation. The sub-demon pirouettes, his robes billowing, a whirlwind of heat snatching the struggling flame from Carlos’s hands. It writhes and bleats, and Pritchard swallows it whole, fire belching from every pore of his exsanguineous skin.

And the blaze that encircles Carlos vanishes. He looks right, looks left, shakes himself like he’s awoken from a nightmare, opens his unmarred palms, turns them over, gazing slack-jawed. His pain has gone, it’s a memory, a rumor of travails past; he feels invigorated, imbued with spirit. From out of the pandemonium, a cool breeze caresses his face.

Lending a mighty hand, Mr. Pritchard stands Carlos up and gently dusts him off. There’s the barest betrayal of softness, of compassion, of ancient wistfulness in his abysmal black eyes.

“You, who have been wronged, can return my Secutor to me, and you, who have a son, must surely empathize,” says the sub-demon. “But in the end, it’s your decision what to believe. So for the last time, mortal, answer me... do you want to get him back...?”

Always comes to this, Carlos rues. Everything is a choice - life, love, trust - with either a reward or a penalty. What to think, what to decide, what to gain. Or lose? Your peace of mind, weighed against your immortal soul. Frowning, Carlos turns his face away, and closes his eyes.

And when he re-opens them, he finds himself among many men standing in a mob in a dead-end detour off an alley. It’s night and the air resounds with nearby clamor, but here the moon, almost overhead, shines upon a private theatre. Carlos gazes through the waiting bodies, sees a pickup truck parked alongside a high brick wall. The tailgate of the truck hangs down and supports two naked girls - one bent over, head between her arms, arms outstretched, wrists pinned, attractive white butt arched; the other on her back, hands that aren’t hers clutching her chest and neck and raising and spreading her legs. Both bitches, as they’re addressed, have unwanted company with many more

queued up to be entertained. Next in line is a sharp-dressed teen with pop idol looks, being pushed ahead, knife in hand, while voices cajole him overtop female grunts and gasps that it's time to be a man.

"Ronnie!" Carlos calls out. His path, he realizes, has led his son here. Never has that path more richly demanded repentance, and never has he felt so much dread.

He rushes forward. Everyone turns, affronted. One man is brushed, jumps and grabs his arm as though stung, yelling what the fuck! As Ronnie, nervously uncertain of what he's getting into, glances back around at this sudden commotion, Carlos clamps a hand upon his wrist. But his touch is like ice, and freezes to Ronnie; the boy's skin whitens in an instant and goes numb. He cries out in pain, and Carlos, stunned and dismayed, lets go and stares at his fingers. Seeing him, Ronnie shouts in terror, backs off, shakes his head, and bolts from the mob and the blind. The mob sneers at Carlos in condescension; he flips them an obscene gesture, then races after.

Carlos rounds a corner into a dimly moonlit alley dotted with shuffling figures muttering to themselves or whimpering. Up ahead, Ronnie sprints and dodges; the boy's young, has a head start and panic as a motivator. Desperation motivating him, Carlos gamely gives chase and to his delight finds there's a strange new power in his stride and his feet hardly touch the ground.

They emerge from the darkness and

isolation onto a wide city street in full swing. A bus full of chorus singers drives by, a bright red banner across the hood shouting GOD IS COMING FOR YOU. The air rings with rock music and brass bands, Walk Don't Walk signals and jackhammers, roaring engines and piping car horns. The street is a river of four-wheeled humanity, semi-trailers, fire trucks, police cars, ambulances with sirens peeling, bikers at full throttle, hot cars laying rubber, and cabs darting in and out like sleek steel birds. Breakneck and deafening.

Ronnie lurches down the pavement of a crowded city sidewalk, his eyes wide, his mouth agape from breathing hard. His tan slacks and emerald sport jacket with the turned-up collar are dishevelled from running. A silver cross on a necklace bounces against his chest, threatening to loop up around his ears.

Carlos matches Ronnie step for step, stretches out and grabs him hard on his shoulder, wrenching him backwards. "Come with me, boy," he urges, "I'm going to save you!"

The youth yanks himself free from his father's subterranean cold grip. "Get away from me!" he yells. "You're dead!"

He throws a punch and misses, then takes off again, Carlos fast on his heels. As though repelling invisible obstacles, they weave and flit down a street rocking with nightlife: beat cops issuing tickets, firemen pulling hoses, cleaners spinning wheels of

chance; neighborhood watch teams blowing whistles, vigilantes working crowd control; protesters shaking signs, evangelists awarding prizes, fanatics banging tambourines; philosophers offering pamphlets, social workers hawking hot dogs, idealists holding their hands out. Everyone loving the sights, sounds, smells.

Carlos springs like a sideshow cat, takes Ronnie down into a line of trashcans, garbage strewn everywhere. They grapple, Ronnie thrashing himself out of the lifeless embrace.

“Fuck off!” he insists. “Don't touch me!”

“Stop resisting me!” Carlos orders. “I'm your father!”

“Are you fucking kidding?” Ronnie snaps. He lands a big right haymaker Carlos lashed out with the nights he stumbled home stoned or drunk, dropping him. As the boy vanishes into the crowds, Carlos sees a momentary vision of Ronnie broken and bleeding, receiving endless spike-knuckled wallops while the fires of Hell rage about him. Damned if he'll let that happen. Carlos leaps up and is off in pursuit again, sidestepping bong-smoking skateboarders, vagrants shuffling and mumbling, beggars haunting tent flaps, bag ladies in doorways, a swami on a pole, freaks on display, bouncers manning night clubs, bare-knucklers challenging all comers, dancers high-kicking by the vaudeville, gaudy pimps with half-naked hookers beckoning drunks into

the burlesque, perverts overflowing the sex shops, addicts and pushers kissing under the grandstand, pickpockets and cashier-grabbers marauding the arcade, and smartly-dressed shoppers perusing the pawn shops, the check cashers, the laundromats and liquor stores, the gun shops, the banks, the insurance brokers, the notaries, the lawyers, and the bus stop where at last they come to wait and pose with collective patience for something with wheels to escort them safely home.

In front of the bus stop, which is situated across the street from a floodlit white church with a sky-high spire, Carlos trips up Ronnie, who falls and rolls and comes up, knife in hand. They square off like a blood feud, neither attacking nor relinquishing. Intrigued, all concept of departure is superseded and a circle of onlookers laden with merchandise forms around them.

The church spire stares like a gargoyle while the street reminds Carlos of a pit, deep as a canyon, long as forever, its steel and glass precipices swathed in pandemonium and bright lights. He shudders at the memory and the parallels. “Come on, boy,” he beckons, “it's not too late.”

Ronnie is painfully aware of facing another audience; he finds that, as with the last one, despite attitude and bling accountability still sucks. Again, this indecision turns to self-loathing, but now there's time for it to realize its destiny and become vengeance.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," he snarls. He flexes, throws his head back and twirls his knife, inviting Carlos to advance. "You were a lousy father, an evil man and a bad influence. Everything I've done is your fault."

Impressed, the circle's attention turns questioningly to Carlos, who looks, to judge by their expression, and for want of a better description, as downbeat as everyone on the street who's currently not of their circle. Some go so far as to shield their shopping bags from him.

He nods with empathy and shakes his head. "I did wrong, and I'm sorry. But you're my son, and you have to believe I love you." Carlos points away from the circle and the spire, off in a hazy direction from whence all things appear to come. "Let me take you away from all this."

The circle frowns, and there's disquiet muttering that the dishevelled one pointed away from them and the church. They turn back to the good-looking one, gazing upon him favorably and with encouragement that he will smite the other down and stand up for what they represent.

"You never showed me any love," Ronnie accuses. "You never had any to give. What did you ever do for me? You never cared, you never listened. You just bossed me around, do this, do that, shut the fuck up and do what I say, not what I do. You lived for yourself and I didn't matter. You were nothing to me. You were bet-

ter off dead, I'm glad you died, I wanted you dead."

The boy's voice breaks and his lower lip trembles. He clenches his knife as though trying to convince himself to just let go and throw it. His eyes burn with hatred and sadness. Pierced to the heart, Carlos covers his face and hangs his head with shame, and the embarrassment this has caused the onlookers is enough for them. They drop their bags and swarm Carlos, choke-holding him, pinning his arms. Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, none react to his freezing touch as Ronnie did. It's as if they can't feel him, or he them.

"We went together!" Carlos cries over his struggles. "You were going with me!"

"Why should I go with you?" Ronnie retorts. Fighting tears, he sends a beseeching look to the sky, at the spire, down to the street, at the pandemonium, and finally bitterly at his father.

"I'll go," he hisses, his lip curling back in a sneer, "with anyone but you."

From beneath a pawn shop's awning, a leviathan, a broad-chested glowing god steps out into the streetlight. He must be seven feet tall, with shoulders like bridge supports and arms like wrecking balls. His brush cut is radiant orange and he wears a boastful, seductive smile while he nods to one and all and offers his hand in friendship, support and guidance to Ronnie.

The circle gasps in admiration, know-

ing anyone so beautiful must be Heaven-sent and celebrated. Several people applaud lustily, while the circle, holding Carlos fast as his struggling increases and even covering his mouth because it seems he's trying to shout something, parts to allow the Secutor to approach.

Entranced, Ronnie returns its smile and accepts its outstretched hand. But an unexpected warmth, like pressing his palm onto a hot stove, startles the boy. The Secutor fastens itself onto him, effortlessly draws him close, and with a familiar ravenous malevolence grins in his face.

It shatters Ronnie's enamor. Paling in recognition, he starts to squirm and try to release himself. The circle laughs, encouraged. "Don't be afraid to have someone watch over you," a fashionably dressed woman cheers. "Don't give up fighting for what should be yours," says a man wearing an executive suit and diamond tiepin.

Ronnie tries to wriggle out from under the pain, smells burning skin, sees a six-fingered scorch mark on his wrist. He whimpers like a caught beast, frightened by the Secutor's strength and the gleam of hellish entitlement in its eyes. With a final nod to the admiring circle, it spins Ronnie around, jams his well-dressed arm up behind his well-dressed back and begins to move him, step by resisting step, towards the yawning black hole of a nearby alley.

"No! No! Not that way!" Ronnie cries, a little boy's terror in his voice. "Let me

go!"

With one final desperate effort, he strains against the clutches of the Secutor and reaches back for Carlos, calling out for his father. Not for assistance; there's no hope this dazzling false god that took his father and has come for him can be exposed. But only to touch him a last time, to say goodbye. Trapped in the circle, Carlos sees Ronnie extend his hand. Twelve hours ago, it was extended, it seemed for the first time in their lives, and he was denied the chance to take it. Now, feeling an overpowering love, he swears by all that's holy he won't be denied again.

A whirlwind of suits, ties, jewellery and shopping bags flies in every direction as Carlos breaks free. Screaming like an abyssal chorale, he plows the sidewalk crowd aside and leaps on the back of the Secutor, sinking his teeth in its neck. Molten blood plumes out, showering them both. Bellowing, the Secutor throws Ronnie to the ground, then reaches behind and flips Carlos like a pinwheel into the neon facade of a hotdog stand. Carlos rises, gawking at his hands; they steam, the Secutor's heat melting their iciness. One long grapple, he fears, could liquify him.

The sidewalk people look on and cheer, whistling at their favorites. Carlos grimly faces the Secutor, his hands dripping water. He can't back down, and he won't let himself. He smiles. The Secutor grins knowingly, raises twin red-hot six-fingered fists against a backdrop of bright lights,

shouting barkers and calliope music, and takes a mighty step forward. Or half a mighty step, because Ronnie hits it in the ribs with a flying tackle and sends it crashing to the pavement. His smart white duds are blackened and smoking where the Secutor bled on him; on his face and arms are incendiary welts. Still, he thrashes at the demon, landing face blows the Secutor laughs off with a sound like guttural rumbling. It clamps its hand completely around the boy's neck and rises, uplifting his writhing body like a sideshow trophy. Triumphantly it howls, its eyes red, its magnificent frame glowing, and the crowds step back and ooh and aah.

All the cacophony of the world, of man and nature, of the blessed and the damned, seems to crescendo to accompany this moment. For Carlos, this is the edge of the pit upon which either he must cling or fall. Above everything, he hears his shrieking son's skin begin to sizzle, and the midnight bell begin to toll in the great white church across the street. Twelve times it will chime, then he knows that will be it. The choice was made, the effort is his, the time is now.

The Secutor buckles as Carlos hits him head-on. They wrestle, not with each other, but for the youth. Wherever Carlos claps his ice-cold hands on his son's red-hot wounds, they heal. The sidewalk crowd breaks out with wild cheers and applause. For the Secutor it's too much; it barks in protest, can't land an injury, can't get a handhold anymore. It lets go, and the boy,

now wound free, falls away into the waiting arms of strangers who shower him with love and gifts.

Carlos was waiting for this. He locks himself around the Secutor, gets saturated by an explosion of hissing steam, but feels the demon's broiling form crack. It flails at him, wailing fearfully, and even as he begins to melt, with all his resolve Carlos lifts the Secutor and staggers, united as though inseparable, into the street and out into the middle of traffic. Heavenly voices fill his ears, then a roaring engine, then the million-trumpet blast of a warning horn. And as the midnight bells chime overhead, the last thing he and the Secutor see is an oncoming bus full of chorus singers and a bright red banner across the hood shouting GOD IS COMING FOR YOU...

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Flesh flies and the searing miasma of the pit rings with the snap of spiked whips as couples flay at each other relentlessly, standing knee deep in their lake of colloidal ejecta. At the lake's edge,

Mr. Pritchard cups the Secutor's chin in his flaming hand and moodily shakes his flowing ebony locks, the Secutor hanging its head and glowering over at Carlos, standing nearby. It didn't have to end up this way, is what Carlos senses. Still, both demons sigh hard as though resolved not to give up on each other and abandon hope for better days. It's a touching moment, and for his part, Carlos envisions Ronnie in a

safe place with new strength, wisdom and prospects, and feels glad.

A twin-like, yet strikingly less demonic image of Mr. Pritchard pulls back the curtains of the sub-demon's forehead and smiles at Carlos. It blossoms a pair of bulbous, crimson lips that sail over to plant a tender wet kiss of subterranean gratitude on Carlos's cheek, also with a little hot tongue. He blushes. The Secutor glares at him like a jilted lover, and snarls at its master.

Two colossal whips appear in Carlos's hands. Metalliferous, snake-scaled, spike-tailed and ponderously heavy, they would topple a lesser man, yet to his surprise he holds them up and admires them, then cracks them like a pharaoh's slave driver, the bloody sky overhead quivering. He feels renewed, responsible, now oddly a part of this place.

Legions of guffawing monstrosities indicating his inner satisfaction and pleasure briefly render Mr. Pritchard's features a teeming exultation. Then all becomes as hoary as before, and he smiles plainly. "Stick around for awhile," he tells Carlos. "At any rate, what choice have you?"

The sub-demon motions the Secutor out into the middle of the foul, bubbling lake, and follows. They turn, two already-scalding forms no different amongst thrashing thousands, and gaze back as if both being in acceptance of their lot and stewardship they're eager to get started.

Carlos nods, and thinks, yes, this is a moral place. He lets go as if allowing doves to flee, and the whips speed up and over like coiled, black arrows into waiting fists. "Get to it," he says.

They most avidly, passionately, vengefully do.

Carlos nods again, but doesn't smile. It's not a place for smiling, at least not yet for him. Grimly, he walks on, along through the vast, burning vista, as sub-creatures with their harpoons and pitchforks bow. Maybe someday he'll have cause to smile again. While considering that, he pauses as a new naked, shredded, masticated figure with a blissful look emerges glowing from the maelstrom and begins to ascend the gleaming staircase of solid gold. From where he stands, Carlos can't see the top of the staircase, but he knows when the figure reaches it, he'll finally be on his way to that faraway ball of light. That's something to be glad about.

Carlos hears an anguished grunt, finds himself next to the meadow of holes roofed with barbed wire, from one of which a gory, crenellated soul hangs, one handless arm looped over, lugging himself up through the wire even as huge claws paw at him and animals scream below.

Imagining his pain, Carlos goes over and squarely kicks the soul in the head, plummeting him back down the hole to vanish for the next eternity.

"You're not ready," he says. ❖

“MCLEAN BOYS AND THE WILD ALEX HARE”

by MELODIE CORRIGALL

I sailed into the meeting, the first since my two weeks off, expecting to be cheered for my negotiating skills, but was met instead with a sea of grim faces.

“Didn’t the trade go through?” I asked.
“Isn’t the menace gone?”

“He’s gone alright,” said the chairperson.
“But in exchange we got someone worse.”

“Not another brother?”

“Oh no. The wild one.”



The week before I left on holiday we'd had a meeting at which we had finally decided to get rid of the whiner.

As usual we were clustered around fluffy white tables, enjoying a break and beefing about clients who moaned about their fate: the whiner being the worst.

"I wish he'd been sent to hell," said one disgruntled worker. Nods all around.

"As if we could choose who goes where," said the trainee.

"It's not as if the proper procedures aren't followed," grumbled another.

"So today the usual complaint from the McLean boy?" asked the chairperson who never had to serve on the Complaints Desk.

"Yeah, whine, whine, whine."

"Why are we called the McLean Boys without first names and Hare is called the Wild Alex Hare? Why is he the only one who's wild?"

"Did you explain we had no authority on earth?"

"Of course, for the 25th time."

"I blame this on the wipe out. The technology they were using last century was so bad

people could remember things."

"Worse still they seem to be able to hear what is going on down below."

"Yeah. He's read all the books and seen the movie. He wants to be the star but is only a walk-on."

"So is there anything we can do to shut him up?"

"No. But if the boys ended up here why wasn't Wild Alex Hare sent here?"

"He was sent back to earth for another round. Hoping he would be less wild."

"And was he?"

"Well less violent and in a more acceptable way. He was a minister of the Church of Forgiveness. "

"So he didn't kill people?"

"Only if they came unto his property but mostly he just slept with their wives."

"And in the trade we got him?"

"Yeah, he ended up below but they decided to trade him."

"We keep asking for a check on who is being traded but we just end up with whoever they want to get rid of."

“And I can see why they wanted to get rid of him.”

“He’s already been at the Complaints Desk five times in four days.”

“And what is his complaint?”

“Hates harp music, argues adultery should be a sin so he shouldn’t have been traded and doesn’t want to be the same place as the McLean boys.”

“Well so what to do?”

“Why not put the four of them somewhere where they can fight it out?”

“Sure. What about the middle waiting room?”

“I thought it was shut down in an austerity move.”

“I say we open it up.” ❖

“THE TALE WHOSE END CAN NEVER BE TOLD”

by FLORA JARDINE

Gathly Grange was a hulking mansion to which murky legends clung, including the strange tale about the day the dawn was late. It wasn't late because clouds blocked out the sunlight, as often happens during bad weather. It was midsummer and there were no clouds that day. Dawn was seen to break on time by the few folks who were up that early – hunters, mostly – but then they saw the dawn reverse.

Yes: they saw the sun sink back whence it had come, beneath the horizon.

“But that's impossible,” people said. “There must have been an eclipse.”

But no eclipse known to astronomers was recorded on that day. It happened about a hundred years ago, and no one who witnessed it is still alive today. But the tale they told at Gathly Grange was that the sun seemed to stutter, or stumble, while the moon grew huge and pressed down on the eastern horizon and a gloom spread across the land. And then a great moaning began, a chorus of soft animalistic wails.

Then dawn broke a second time, and the strange wide pressing face of Mother Moon faded away. Father Sun resumed his power of rising, the moaning died away and a hush fell across the landscape. Then gunshots were heard, as the hunters resumed their work.

“It wasn't the guns, but the deathly quiet that woke me up,” said Humblethwaite, the butler at Gathly Grange. Later that morning he had found that one of the guests at the Grange had died in his sleep overnight. “Nothing could wake *him* up,” announced Humblethwaite.

That was how the Grange got its reputation for being haunted. Diana-Euphemia Sylvanus, another of the guests who had been there at a weekend party on that summer day of the delayed dawn, decided to write the story down. She wrote it as a novel which enjoyed a spell of popularity in the middle part of the 20th century: “*The Ghosts of Gathly Grange*”. I remember seeing the book in the public library many times as a child growing up in the village of Gathly. The title on the spine drew me, but although I borrowed the book several times something always stopped me finishing it.

I would start reading about the guests who had gathered for the weekend, the drinks being served on the terrace and the jazz trio playing in the garden. I could hear the plaintive keening of the saxophone hanging in the evening air, ineffably sad, and lingering in the ears of the guests as they withdrew one by one to bed, one destined not to wake in the morning. I read to the point where the layout of the big house

was described, and the guests sensed the presence of ghosts from grand house parties of the past.

The guests noted the cold passage on the second-floor landing, where there hung a portrait of the game-keeper's daughter who had drowned herself in the pond. The eldest son of the Grange had been in love with her; he it was who insisted on placing her portrait in the hallway before he went off to fight in the First World War. He never returned. His body was never found in France, but some said his soul found its way back to Gathly Grange — haunting it. This, as I learned later, was standard fare for the genre, but the unusual thing about this story was how it seemed to resist being read.

It dwindled and came to a stop, strangely bogged down as if the plot got sucked into quicksand. It was heavy going, and my eyes drooped. Maybe I wasn't ready for "chapter books" yet. I always took the book back to the library unfinished. Eventually it disappeared from the shelves. "No one ever reads it," said the librarian, "so we culled it."

Only old Mrs. Gath, whose ancestors had founded the village of Gathly back in Medieval times, was said to have read it to the end but she was found dead in her bed the next day, so no one could confirm that she had. Her daughter had had a distraught phone call from her at midnight, about closing the cover on a lethal tale. "I was gripped by the spell of it," said Mrs. Gath, "and the *smell* from it."

"Take your pills and have a hot drink,"

suggested her daughter. When she went to visit her in the morning, the daughter found her mother dead. Later, when she cleared her mother's cottage, she took the book back to the library. That was when, noticing a sickening smell rising from the yellowing pages, the librarian decided to throw *The Ghosts of Gathly Grange* away.

In time, Gathly Grange was sold. The big house and grounds, outbuildings and the barn where cattle had been housed were converted into a spa-hotel, a retreat for people with anxiety conditions who were fleeing bad experiences and needed a rest cure. No one around the area seemed to know who the new owners were, and the staff provided no information, but it was rumoured that a distant relative of the former owner was the buyer. Security guards were hired and large metal gates placed across the entrances. Privacy was a priority. No one passing the Grange could see beyond the curve of the long driveway, and no doubt the inmates could not see the road the long driveway led down to. None of the spa guests was ever seen in the village.

I left town for a time, going to university and then travelling and working abroad. By the time I returned Gathly Grange had burned down. The fire spawned a new wave of ghostly tales about the Grange, for during the fire people had heard the disembodied moaning again. Hunters had been hired to go out at dawn to kill the deer that were over-running the hotel's garden, and the foxes that were barking at night, and the badgers said to be carrying disease. It

was local hunters who had seen the moon press back the rising sun many decades before, and this time the hunters, sons and grandsons of the original ones, saw through the trees that smoke was rising from the roof of the hotel behind them.

This time it was winter and a chilly, foggy dawn. The smoke swelled into dark shifting shapes which filled the hunters with unease. An alarm went off and then sirens woke the hotel staff and guests. All said later that they were torn from bad dreams, nightmares full of threat and a sense of deep inescapable guilt. They struggled awake and ran to their windows to see the smoke billowing from the roof on one side of the building, and all saw the same shifting shapes as had filled their dreams — mind-wisps made material.

Everyone escaped, but much of the building went up in flames. Ambulances came for the patients who moaned pitifully as they were carried away, sufferers of anxiety taking a turn for the worse. The spa-hotel went bankrupt and was about to be demolished, but local history-lovers and heritage activists wanted the old building restored and preserved. Fund-raising was begun. When the charred rooms were cleared out, someone found an old copy of the tale I could never finish, *The Ghosts of Gathly Grange*.

At a sale of goods to raise funds for the restoration of the historic house, I saw the book lying on a table. The sight dragged at me with a weight of memory — memory of my first foray into novel-reading as a child, which gave the book a special significance.

I wondered whether I should take a stab at reading the thing again, but as I hesitated another buyer picked it up, flipped through the pages and took it off to the cash register. An elderly man, he left with a bag of purchases on the back seat of his old Volvo. That evening, I saw him again in the pub and heard him say that he was going home to finish his newly-purchased copy of *The Ghosts of Gathly Grange*. He couldn't get it out of his mind, he said, it tugged at him spookily. The next day I learned that he had been in a car accident that morning, and was killed instantly.

The tattered old book turned up again, for the niece of the old man was one of the heritage fundraisers and a writer, and, helping to clear out her uncle's possessions she discovered the book and decided to adapt the tale of the ghosts of Gathly Grange as a piece of Readers' Theatre. It could be performed to raise money toward the restoration fund.

"It's what my uncle would have wanted," said this niece, named Sylvia-Diana. Middle-aged and eccentric, she felt destined to do the rewrite because the original author of *The Ghosts of Gathly Grange*, Diana-Euphemia Sylvanus, had been her distant relative.

The reading was to be performed in the grounds of the Grange. When the time came I was recruited to help clear the out-buildings in preparation. We set up a stage, working late into the evenings for days. One night I was last to leave, and as I did I noticed a script of the newly-adapted play lying on a shelf. I thought of taking a look

at the ending I'd never yet heard, but something stopped me. I became aware of mournful disembodied notes from a lone saxophone, disembodied in that they came from no instrument. The keening seemed to express an ancient sadness from the era of the Grange's haunting. I didn't understand where it was coming from, but with it came foreboding.

The moon was rising, shadows moved, and I heard creatures rustling in the garden's undergrowth. There were mice in the old barn, I had been told, and I heard them now. "Just mice," I told myself nervously as I looked for my jacket. I didn't like mice, which were unpleasant enough in themselves, but these I knew were not ordinary mice, if mice they were at all; these sounded like something unearthly. I hastened home.

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After the night of the final rehearsal before the reading, a major upset occurred. We found out in the morning that all six of the readers, each a character in the tale of the haunted weekend party at Gathly Grange, had become ill. They had been put up at a bed-and-breakfast nearby, and food poisoning was suspected. Replacements had to be found before the big event next night, when the local dignitaries would attend the performance.

"Luckily it's script-in-hand," said Sylvia-Diana, the distant cousin of Diana Sylvanus and author of the re-write. Sylvia-Diana, who took Diana the moonlight huntress as her guide, was always eccentric and had become imperious. "The new readers won't need to memorize anything, but they will need to feel their way into the characters, and the atmosphere," she announced. "This will be done. I feel that



Diana-Euphemia is guiding me. This performance *will* go on.”

Sylvia-Diana had taken to wearing period costume from 1914, the era in which the story was set. She wore a long silk scarf “exactly like the one Diana-Euphemia is wearing in the one portrait we have of her. Of course,” she added theatrically, “I won’t let mine strangle me!”

It turned out that the author of *The Ghosts of Gathly Grange* had been found dead one morning at dawn in the woods near Gath, choked by a long scarf that had become entangled in thorny bushes she had apparently been running through in the moonlight. What she had been running from, no one ever discovered. This story wasn’t included in the author information on the copy of the book I had borrowed from the library, and it was news to me.

On the night of the performance I helped set up the props, and then meant to go home. Superstitiously I decided not to watch the reading. It seemed to be decreed that I would only ever hear the beginning of the story. But decreed by whom? I then decided that this superstitiousness was ridiculous, so I decided to watch the performance after all, but first I’d go down the garden for a smoke before the curtain went up. (One would be torn limb-from-limb if one attempted to smoke in the audience’s space.)

I slipped down to the bottom of the garden and sat beside the pond. I became aware of faint moaning — that soft inhuman wailing again, as if something being

hunted was hiding, cowering. Not again, I thought. I threw the cigarette butt into the pond where it landed on water-weeds. I hoped confusedly that one of those ghost-animals would find it, choke on it and stop its infernal moaning. I felt irrational pity for creatures that did not exist except in my imagination, and I resented having irrational feelings about the non-existent.

Testily I took my seat in the audience. The reading began. It kept close to the dialogue I remembered vividly from the book I had begun so many times but never finished, so many years ago. I still recognized phrases after all this time. The atmosphere that had come off the pages then hung about me now, as the sun set and the lights we had fixed to the stage came on. I found myself dozing. Soon, lulled by the lilting voices of the readers, I was deeply asleep.

I awoke as the actors were taking final bows. Once again I had missed the end of the tale. I hadn’t seen that jazz trio arrive on stage, I was thinking drowsily as I woke up. Where did that come from? I hadn’t heard there would be musicians at the performance ... and there weren’t. There was no ghostly saxophone player, thin as a waft of smoke winding around a sax which was but a glint of moonlight. The musicians had been in my dream, not on stage. As the dream receded, I saw that the audience too had thinned. Not many had stayed for the whole performance — all that mattered was to have paid for the tickets that helped the restoration fund — and most who remained looked as sleepy as I felt, as if under a spell. The moon I saw, was high and bright.

“Sorry ... I didn’t catch that bit at the end ... “ said the man next to me. “Did you?”

“No ...” I replied. “I didn’t hear it, I’m afraid I was asleep.”

After failing once more to hear the end of the tale of the ghosts of Gathly Grange, I began to shuffle off with the rest of the crew, while the six volunteers who had stepped in to replace the original readers were being taken home in a mini-bus. Sylvia-Diana the adapter of the story went with them.

“Drop me off first,” she said, “I’m feeling unwell. I’ve been dizzy since yesterday, and we must all rest up before tomorrow’s performance.” This would be the main performance, which the mayor, academics and literary folks would attend.

It was then that someone noticed flames at the bottom of the garden, leaping upwards to lick at the summer-dried trees whose papery leaves now crackled eerily in the moonlight. The helpers still stacking chairs before making for their cars now began to shout “Fire! Fire!”

“Probably some idiot smoking down there,” yelled someone. “That undergrowth is tinder dry.”

I ran down to the pond, while others yanked at hoses and called the Fire Department. It *couldn’t* have been me, I thought: I know my cigarette butt had landed in the water, I know it was saturated. I had wanted ghosts to choke on it, not ignite a fire with it. I was first at the site, except for two boys who I recognized as locals.

“What happened?” I asked them, out of breath. “Do you live there?” I pointed at the house on the other side of the garden wall.

They nodded, keeping well back from the flames, which were spreading across dry grass away from the pond and toward the converted barn. My cigarette end still lay limply in the weeds where I had thrown it. The boys were filling buckets.

“We thought we could help,” they said over their shoulders, shaken.

“Did you see anyone down here?”

“No, but we heard something: a gun. A gun shot and a shriek. When we got over the fence, we saw only the flames in the grass.”

By now the fire truck had arrived and was aiming hoses from the driveway on the other side of the wall. No cause of the fire was ever found, nor any sign of a shotgun.
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None of the local literary folk, nor the academics and mayor did hear the performance, in the end. The fire was put out, but there was no second performance. While driving the actors home, the mini-bus had overturned in a ditch. No one but the driver survived the crash.

“So what was your reading about?” he had been asking his passengers conversationally. They were silent, as if they weren’t sure. Then they all began to talk at once, telling him the story but each telling a different tale. Before anyone reached the end, the moon was suddenly obscured by a cloud and something — a shadow or a being — leapt into the path of the bus. The

driver swerved and the bus landed in the ditch. "I never heard the end," babbled the driver over and over, in shock as he was taken off in an ambulance. Later, a tree limb was found half-crushed in the bus's path, and he was cleared by police of all blame. He never recovered from waves of toxic guilt, however.

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The fund-raising for the restoration was discontinued, and the Grange was not preserved. No one had the heart to do anything but demolish it. The grounds were bought by an intensive greenhouse operation and paved. Enormous air-controlled glass tunnels for plants now sit on the site. It was a cursed place, said the villagers of Gathly. Who knew what would happen there next? Perhaps the sun would fail to

rise. Maybe Mother-moon would overpower it at last, as it rose on some new day of violence and rapacity.

Maybe now the haunted souls of hunted animals would finally become quiet, but somehow I didn't think so. Not until every last person had forgotten the tale of *The Ghosts of Gathly Grange* would the ghosts recede. I hoped the scripts that re-told their story had been burned in the fire or lost in the bus crash. Only when the story disappeared, its ending forgotten for good, would there be no more victims of the tale. I myself left town after the second fire, for the whole place seemed drenched in a strangeness I wanted to steer my life away from. What's next for Gathly I can't predict. I'm happy not to know the end of that tale either. ❖

END TRANSMISSION