

A Dark and Bloody Business Charley Cat's Carnival: Book 0

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Dedication

For Amanda, always.
(and for Nutmeg...RIP, you beautiful, surly old bitch)

A Dark and Bloody Business (1901)*Hungry.*

Joseph Albers used the tip of his heavy hickory cane to scratch the word into the packed dirt of the crossroads for the third time, and for the third time he scuffed it out at once. Bullfrogs splashed in an unseen creek at the bottom of the drop to the south and grumbled in thick hiccoughs which hammered the base of his skull until his eyes watered. Insects sang in the thick woods crowding the road. Their rippling calls sent his exhausted mind into painful swoops with each buzzing, chittering crescendo. His chest stung where the fist-sized lump of coal dangled inside the rough woolen bag he'd strung around his neck, both his hands and arms up past the elbows were a mess of blisters from poison ivy, the yarrow blooms he held were already wilting in the early summer heat, and the devil he'd come to meet was due any moment. Despite all that, after a full two weeks of fasting – and those coming on the heels of a month of raging illness, far too much death, and far too little food – Joseph could think of only one thing.

Joseph scratched the word in the road again. Surely midnight was almost here. He ran the tip of his cane over it, carving his hunger into the center of the crossroads although he knew full well no matter how hard he pressed, the word would disappear with only a few passes of his cane or his foot. If only he could wipe away the hollow screams of his belly as easily as he erased the word from the dirt, he would be—

Joseph paused. A tense emptiness crept toward him from the west: the insects along Firedown Road were falling silent. As the hush moved toward Joseph, the bullfrogs barked in surprise and went still. Behind the silence, a hulking, creaking noise began to rise.

Past the far end of the crossroads, a hundred feet or so along the edge of Firedown Road where the carriage turnaround clearing ended and the rich Kentucky forest began again in earnest, a brilliant, flickering beast moved just inside the treeline. It was the size of a bear and slunk along with its body hunched down in the way of wolves. The trees shuddered with each of its heavy steps. A curiously sweet odor of smoldering leaves drifted on the wind. It was impossible to see the thing clearly through the forest, or perhaps it was simply that its form shifted with each step. Even from here, Joseph could tell the advancing brute wasn't causing the lumbering noise he heard; that sound moved more rapidly, and came from much farther along Firedown. Deeper shadows loomed along the tree-shadowed road, too many and too close together for him to make out in the dark.

Trust that damned Dickie Beubeau to leave out the most important part: when that sanctimonious con man told Joseph the secret of Hudsonville's success, he hadn't mentioned that the crossroads demon would bring an entire infernal host.

Joseph stared along the length of first Firedown Road, then Runner's Way, but saw none of his neighbors or family. His home, a deeper black atop the high granite rise of Albers Estate Bluff, remained dark and still. That was lucky, at least.

The creature snuffled, and lifted its head. In spite of the distance, and the forest, and the flickering glow of the beast itself, Joseph could see the infinite embers of its eyes take his measure. It kept its gaze on him and began to trot. The shadows pacing it continued their steady advance.

Joseph's heart skittered in an alarming fashion. He cast another nervous glance up the bluff, half expecting his mother's shrill screams to echo through the trees. The venomous crone would doubtless delight in ruining his only opportunity to save Piquette, especially if it meant displaying her control of him before the Devil himself.

When the demon snuffled again, Joseph jumped. He dropped his cane and fumbled in the bag beneath his shirt. His panicked heart stopped its flailing for one terrible moment when the coal fetched up inside and wouldn't budge. An instant later it loosened, and Joseph knelt in the dirt, gasping, with his cane and the scrawled word that had come to define him between himself and the beast. He closed his eyes and raised both hands, one with its clutch of dying blooms and the other closed about the black, oily stone. He took a deep breath of the rapidly warming air just as the creature emerged from the trees and settled across from him. Its red and yellow glow pierced him even through his closed eyelids. An odor, as of some exotic spice set aflame, rippled from the beast, pulsed from its body along with its astonishing heat. He'd expected sulfur; after almost a year and a half in coal country he'd even been ready for it. This rich baking-house scent inflamed the hunger within him even as it made him think of his poor, lost Anna. Each fragrant, obscene breath stole another sliver of his resolve.

Joseph wanted to pray, but hunger and terror crowded the words from his mind before his voice could give them form. The beast murmured and crackled in its own heat.

"You will dim your light," Joseph said. His voice limped from his throat, a pale and frightened thing. Joseph clenched his fist around the coal tight enough for the sharp edges of the rock to dig into his flesh. When he spoke again, his voice was louder.

"You will reshape yourself into a form I find pleasing."

Something chuckled. Footsteps padded along the road. Although the hot red glare on the other side of Joseph's eyelids didn't move, it did fade somewhat. He risked a peek, then opened his eyes. A massive dog-shaped demon sat fifteen feet or so across from him. Flames shimmered along the edges of its fur, and its smoldering eyes were filled with bloodlust and fine high spirits. The fire-dog dropped its jaw to reveal an eight-inch tongue running along two-inch teeth. It panted with doggy good humor. Behind it, a black, spotted cat the size of a mountain lion narrowed its glowing white eyes and strode ahead of the largest woman Joseph had ever seen. A liquid shape darted in front of them all: a speckled wildcat with a kittenish face.

Joseph turned his attention back to the fire-dog. He had to crane his head back to look into its eyes. His throat clicked, suddenly dry. His voice was a pained whisper.

"I abjure thee, demon—"

"You are referencing the wrong religion."

Joseph jumped. The large, cougaresque cat was gone. A man-shaped thing crouched in its place. It looked as though it'd been whelped from an Indian and a Negro. Its ferocious black eyes gleamed in the fire-dog's hellish glow, and the tight, nappy furze at the top of its head blended seamlessly into an impeccable, equally tight beard. Thin fur covered its entire body. Subtle spots glinted deep within the fur. The creature was quite male, and utterly nude. Joseph couldn't look into its eyes, and he certainly couldn't look down below. He opted to look at the large woman instead. She stared back at him, bold as any man, until Joseph had to turn his eyes away from her, too.

The man-thing sprung at Joseph. He skipped backwards, much too slow. It landed on all fours in front of him, stood, and grasped the front of Joseph's vest before

he'd taken more than a few fumbling steps. Joseph leaned back as far as he dared. It twisted its long, black claws into the fabric of his vest and yanked him forward. It leaned its face into the hollow of his neck. Joseph flailed, imagining sharp teeth tearing his veins wide, but the creature held him fast. It inhaled deeply from the left side of his neck, around his throat, and around to the right. It chuckled, and even in its new form Joseph recognized its voice as the one he'd heard before.

"You reek of death," it growled. It took another deep breath. "The deaths of others – many others." It extended its arm, pushing Joseph away and appraising him without releasing him, then pulled him back again, almost cradling him. Joseph's entire body clenched.

"Joseph Albers, Joseph Albers," the creature sang: a simple, purred lullaby, damning and soporific. "What have you done, what have you done?" It repeated its song, and again, and Joseph slumped forward. His hands loosened and his offerings fell. No matter. He heard the judgement in the creature's voice. Joseph realized it was staring into his soul, killing him with those intolerable eyes, and that was fine, that was right. A quiet, melodious death was more than he deserved.

It stopped singing and snarled. Joseph floated, waited to fall to the ground. Somewhere, his useless body was being shaken until its teeth rattled. That was right, too; that was fine.

"Weak as the rest of them," the creature said, then: "Lorelei." Its voice was distant, urgent.

"Wake up."

Joseph snapped awake at once, spasming frantically. Pain lanced through his wasted body. He staggered when the creature set him back on his feet. He tried to shove it away, but it held fast.

"Calm yourself," the large woman said. Joseph relaxed at her jagged-silk voice, the same one that had yanked him from his sudden doze. He glanced around, almost believing all the living and dead of Piquette would have awakened at her call.

The creature released him and Joseph fell to his knees. He scrambled for the coal, gathered the spilled blooms. The fire dog's light was more than ample; it took only a few moments to find it all. Joseph spent a few seconds smoothing the crushed yarrow stems, taking his time to gather his wits before facing that man-shaped thing's flat ebon gaze once more.

Joseph cradled the coal and the yarrow in the crook of his arm and pressed his other hand to the ground. His cane had fallen out of reach; standing without it was a slow, wretched business. Joseph's head spun with hunger and with the lingering aftereffects of the man-shaped thing's hypnotic crooning. When he regained his feet, Lorelei spoke again. Her hair and form shimmered in the fire dog's flickering light: dark-haired and curvaceous, blonde and muscular, captivating and terrible and every inch full of razzmatazz.

"This is no demon you've come to meet," she said, "No devil or imp, no fiery ifreet." Lorelei's rich, searing voice dragged Joseph's attention from the howling pit in his stomach. She spoke in a fast-paced, cadenced patter. Her spiel would almost be at home in the auction-house, but it had a lilting, suggestive air the old sheep-sellers at the State Fair could never hope to match. She circled their little group, moving with a natural, arresting grace.

“He is the god of lust and wanderlust, god of the wet red hunt and the soft wet cunt. The vicious god of speckled cats small and large, of cats blacker than night and bright as the sun. He is Charley Cat –” She extended one enormous arm with a flourish, and the little spotted wildcat leapt onto it. It sat upon her forearm as if it were a fence, curling its tail around her wrist and into her palm.

“–and this is his sister Jenny, the most collected, most self-contained of all felines in this world or any other.”

“Charley Cat? That’s – a curious name for a demon.”

A vicious yowl shredded the air, and a furred weight slammed into Joseph’s chest. Jenny clung to his vest. She pressed her claws into the side of his neck, hurting him but not yet rending his flesh.

“Wrong religion,” Charley Cat snarled. Jenny bared her teeth.

Joseph raised his hands.

“They’re gods,” Lorelei repeated. “And don’t let ‘em scare you just now, hon.” She reached over and plucked Jenny from his chest. Lorelei cradled her in her big arms and chucked the wildcat under her chin until she began purring in a deep thrum.

“They came to parley,” she continued, “and they’ll at least hear your terms.”

Charley Cat grinned all around, ebony fangs glinting in the fire-dog’s light. He scooped up Joseph’s cane and made a small ceremony of handing it across *hungry* to him.

“Of course we will,” Charley Cat said. “I do not kill those who bring offerings to the crossroads – not without first hearing them out.”

“Well, I am relieved to hear that, sir,” Joseph said. He smoothed his vest, tried to still his shaking hands. “May I inquire as to the nature of that...beast?” he tipped his cane toward the flickering fire-dog.

“That is my dog,” Charley Cat replied.

“Nut-Meg,” Lorelei added.

“And are you a goddess, madam?” Joseph asked.

Lorelei laughed. It was a cutting, shattering sound. Joseph felt his loins quicken with each note.

“Oh no, young man,” she replied. “I’m just a singer.”

“And the best talker on this side of the world,” Charley Cat declared. “She brings stories to life, this one; better, she can turn any tip.” Lorelei cast him a practiced *oh-you* glance that set Joseph’s blood fizzing even as he recognized it as pure theater.

Charley Cat squatted on the other side of *hungry* and gestured for Joseph to sit across from him. Joseph’s knees ached far too much for that.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, “but I believe I will stand.” He bent as well as he was able and presented the items in the crook of his elbow to Charley Cat. The creature – Joseph could not quite think of this nude, merry fiend as a god – reached up and collected Joseph’s offering. He frowned.

“You bring a rock. And some sort of...dying chokeweed?”

“Coal,” Joseph replied. “And yarrow.”

Charley Cat cocked his head, gave a curious, purring growl.

“Yarrow is for health,” Joseph said.

“Mmm. Your folk assign meanings to the most useless things.” He threw the flowers to the ground and tossed the coal to Nut-Meg. The fire-dog pawed at the stone. Charley Cat leaned over and stroked the word Joseph had carved into the dirt.

“A rock, a flower, and *hungry*.”

“That isn’t something I want. It is something I am.”

Again: the cocked head, the odd growl.

“I had the yellow fever for four full weeks, could barely take in broth. And I’ve fasted for two weeks to prepare for our meeting tonight.”

“Why?”

“I was advised to prepare my body and soul as if I were to meet the Savior Himself.”

Charley Cat laughed. Joseph made a private vow that he’d punch Dickie Beaubeau in his fat, lying face when he saw him next.

“The flower is for health, then,” Charley Cat said. “And the rock?”

“I want this land to be prosperous.”

“You should have brought wheat.”

“We need prosperity less in farming than in coal.”

“Ah. That could be difficult.”

“Coal abounds throughout Kentucky,” Joseph said. His automatic exhortation had the feel of habit, which was no surprise. It was something he’d said many a time, after all, when he was haranguing his extended family. He’d finally said it with enough authority to convince them to move with him from civilized Atlanta to this brutal, supposedly rich country.

“Not here. You chose the wrong place for that stone.”

“Surely you can fill this place with coal, as Beaubeau claims you turned the granite-riddled earth and sucking swamps of Hudsonville into rich farmland.”

“Perhaps. If you accept my terms.”

Joseph’s throat clicked. Beneath Nut-Meg’s soft crackling, he thought he heard a noise. He looked up at his home, but the firedog’s bright light set the rockface aglow and he couldn’t see a thing at the top of the Bluff. Charley Cat already had terms in mind, then...of course he did. Best to add something to his side of the balance before the demon spoke again.

“I’ve also brought my hickory cane,” Joseph added.

Charley Cat shook his head, turned away. “What hickory offers is closed to your kind.”

“Security is closed to us?”

Squint. Growl.

“Hickory is a solid wood. I want my people to be safe.”

Charley Cat laughed. “Meaningless associations, or the wrong ones,” he said to Lorelei. “There is no safety here,” he told Joseph. “Do you know nothing about this dark and bloody land you’ve claimed?”

“Kentucky is far tamer than many places across this nation.”

“This is not a settling place,” Lorelei said. The trees overhanging the crossroads dipped their tops at the sadness in her voice. “It has ever only been a hunting ground, a burial ground, a waystation on the path to better things.”

“The First People knew this,” Charley Cat added. “You and yours lay claim to any accursed space. But stay here long enough, and this land will turn its terrible attentions toward you.”

Joseph drew himself up. “We can make our way here.”

“You can. With my assistance.”