

Primal

By Larry Griffin

(2017)

Jamie

The colors of the carnival were bright and eye-catching. From its various food trucks wafted smells of fried food, and Jamie Hatlin could hear the sounds of people screaming, hurled into the air by machinations that spun and whirled and twisted tirelessly from sun-up to sundown, making sounds like they were about to break but holding steady. It was a feast for the senses. It was full of that danger and gluttony – the American spirit, thought Jamie.

Jamie was in town for the weekend home from his job out of state. He had nothing to do between now and Sunday afternoon for his brother's birthday dinner, which he had been dreading. The prospect of sitting there, single, among his siblings with their significant others and their perfect jobs, was not something he looked forward to.

And he'd always enjoyed the carnival – as a teenager he took his first girlfriend here, kissed her on the Ferris wheel and felt her up in the dark during a magician's performance. He'd lost touch with the girl a year later when he moved to college and lost touch with carnivals altogether for several years after that – they were but an illusion, here for a week and then gone.

But as he walked through it now, gazing at the warmly lit pop-up food stands with dripping glaze and fried monstrosities, listening to the creaking sounds and the excited, fearful cries and hearing the boisterous shouts of the carnival barkers goading travelers to come and play their money-bait games, he realized that was what he liked about it – the illusion. He enjoyed the brief respite from reality.

He supposed it was a glum way to see the world. Since the bottoming-out of the economy, the loss of his good job and the loss of his last girlfriend – a shallow thing, not real at all, she'd left him as soon as things got hard – he'd been depressed. He'd had nothing but freelance jobs and temp positions for a year now, paycheck to paycheck living. If there was any way to pick himself out of that hole, he supposed a carnival was close enough.

So Jamie Hatlin picked a ride – something called the Starbreaker, a giant contraption that swung you in the air like a pendulum and did that back and forth, higher and higher, until it went upside-down and you were staring at Lake Hamilton nearby from a sideways view. He paid the tickets. The thing hurled him high in the air and he felt his gut clenching up – a real rush.

Briefly, he forgot about the whole travesty.

Then when his feet were on the ground again it returned – a sinking feeling. At the midway he found a tiger show, white tigers standing on their back legs, jumping through hoops. Animal rights activists be damned. All the things you loved, Jamie thought, you found tainted later on because of the awful things people did. In this case it was the cages and the bad conditions, beds of dry straw, polluted water.

So he walked away from the tiger cages.

Thinking it was time to go, he started to walk towards the exit, and that was when he heard the tiny, futuristic ping notification on his phone. A Tinder message, he discovered as he took his phone from his pocket – a slender Hispanic girl, somewhat familiar, named Asha. They'd gone to the same high school. She messaged him and told him she saw he was in the area, she had been attracted to him all those years ago, and would he want to hang out later?

He told her, sure. Said he was at the carnival now.

She said she'd be there in an hour.

So Jamie walked back through the fair. Again to the towering vaults of rides stretching up to the sky, screaming colors and sleek metal, oil drums for the insane. He bought himself an overpriced beer and sat in the middle of the rides, sipping it slow, feeling a cool March breeze on his bare arms.

Bozo the Clown

He lived in darkness the first eight years of his life, with his parents too drunk to pay the bills. He didn't know that until later though – the reason why. He just knew he had his room with the small smudged window and a few broken old toys and his parents would, occasionally, barge in drunk and put a plate of food in front of him. He would live this life unassuming, no school, no nothing; just vague sounds out the window, until a social worker took him out of there at eight years old, put him in a brightly lit room and started to educate him late.

By then there was a hole in his soul. Something missing – a jigsaw piece of his mind forever lost under a couch. They stopped trying eventually. He got through school at a bare minimum. They didn't want to keep you forever. They passed you because they didn't want to look at the vortex in your eyes, see that you knew all that you needed to know in this world.

The first time he met Father Elroy he was drunk in a bar, barely conscious, only way he could numb the everything in his head, the swirling miasma. Father Elroy, heavysset and strong-chinned and bald, had dark and confident eyes. He told Bozo that there existed a quota that needed to be met, and only a chosen few knew of it. The quota was human souls, and once enough of them had been fed to the beast, the end of the world would come.

Which, Bozo had to be honest, sounded good. He yearned for the dark. But he couldn't just kill himself. That wouldn't be satisfactory, though he had considered it before. He wanted to revel in the destruction of this whole godforsaken disgusting claustrophobic society man had built. When the cities burned and the people, so self-satisfied and smug, were left as helpless as they really were – that would be when Bozo could finally sleep that big sleep. There was a screaming unrest and rage that lived in him and would never sleep otherwise.

His name wasn't really Bozo, obviously. He'd killed before. Knife-into-flesh. Just randoms, nobodies, people he met once and then they happened to be in a quiet enough place. He took the opportunity, and never stayed in one place for too long. Credit cards from those he disposed of helped with that, and cash he conned from various rubes. People were pretty easy when you got the hang of it. A carpenter, a truck driver, a painter, a janitor – he'd worn many disguises. Clown was just another of them. White-face makeup and ugly garish colors. It was what it was. He did a show or two a day and spent his free time stalking the grounds. There were many potential targets and he would take them to the furthest red-and-yellow tent at the edge of the carnival. That was to be their final destination.

Jamie

Asha arrived smelling like lilacs and apples, wearing a sleeveless black top that showed off her cleavage and a pair of worn jeans and high-tops. She gave Jamie a hug and pressed herself against him and he could smell her when she let go. They talked for a little while about their lives; neither of them having any extraordinary stories. She'd traveled abroad a few years back and lived with a guy who made swords to sell at renaissance faires. He had gone sailing on the Atlantic with a bunch of guys in a punk band and they had all got food poisoning at the same time from a box of bad Chinese. That had been about the extent of it.

Then they walked. He bought them cotton candy and they ambled along through the fair, ignoring the catcalls from the fair attendants with their scam-games. They looked at the spectacle – the spinning machines sending people vaulting to the sky, the clownish colors of the food-stands selling grotesque meat on sticks and funnel cakes to those eager to devour. The kids running and screaming in glee. The plastic eyes of the dolls of cartoon characters hanging like dead cows on hooks, waiting to be won; prizes.

He mentioned to Asha that he'd always been so fascinated by the carnival.

“Oh yeah?” she said.

“Yeah. It's all so fleeting. It's just here and gone, but it's so crazy and memorable. Like, when did you ever go to a fair and go 'hey, I don't remember that'?”

She giggled – high and girlish, obviously intended to sound young and sexy. He wondered why sounding younger, childlike, was sexy – what a bizarre conception, he thought. She said, “I guess you're right. So what's your job like?”

She wasn't interested in what he had to say about the carnival. He supposed that was to be expected. But he didn't tell her the truth about his job, which was that he barely survived paycheck to paycheck freelancing drawing posters for bands and theater productions – he told her he was doing well at a graphic design firm, that he really loved his job. That got her to smile. She told him she felt the same about her job at the TV station, running around chasing stories with a camera in tow, mic in hand. It was her dream job, she said.

They ended up making out for a bit at a table by an old rickety ride called the Silver Bullet that made sounds like a sputtering car engine about to die every time it rotated around its track. Her body was soft and the breeze was cool. The sun was going down.

Bozo the Clown

He'd moved his car to a vacant supermarket lot two blocks away and his coworkers all thought he had gone home when his shift was up – then he'd snuck back to the carnival and kept on the down-low all evening. As much as a clown could do, anyway. No one expected him to be anywhere or do anything now.

He walked the grounds at an even pace, trying to keep his face neutral and pleasant – they liked the clown to smile and while he couldn't smile as such, he could at least look unthreatening. Couldn't displease the children – the only clown law to abide by.

The day was waning now and it would be perfect as the crowds began to dwindle. He looked for those with the glow of happiness about them. They'd be the ones least-likely to be wary of what was around them. They would be easy prey. And there was lots of that here, he thought.

A young woman of maybe 23 years came up to him with two young men, asking him to take a picture of them. He gazed upon them, the virility of youth, all short sleeves and skin and the rush of excitement on their faces. He stood back and held the girl's phone, took the picture. Looking through the camera lens he was sizing them up. Could one of these three be the key that would unlock the gates for him?

He let them pass. He did not feel the rush of the passion required for this – it needed to feel right, the knife married to the flesh of the victim. Otherwise what needed to happen, could not.

The other possible victims flitted in and out of view – happy couples with children touting stuffed animals and large swathes of cotton candy like pyramids. Boyfriends and girlfriends arm-in-arm, the happiness he himself would never have. Children running in groups to the rides, sometimes turning

back with disappointed looks, too short to ride. All around him the lights grew bright in the dark – reds and blues and yellows and greens and purples, a symphony of them glittering like gaudy stars in the dark.

Then he saw the tan-skinned girl with the mane of curly black hair and the glittering gold on her fingers, and something clicked – it must've been what some felt at first love.

She was heading into one of the bathrooms. He started to walk towards the door she'd entered. The bathroom was all piss-yellow tiles and it smelled like waste. The mirrors were smudged. He looked into one of them and saw his face, a garish white-streaked abomination with curly hair the color of the rainbow and a giant bulbous red nose, distorted by the dents and the cracks in the mirror into something horrific. He thought he looked like the devil.

Then he receded from view – she wouldn't know he was there; not then.

A few moments later she emerged from the stall, was checking her face briefly in the mirror. He was behind her in a second, always having had quiet and nimble feet. He saw them both in the cracked and dented old mirror, her tan feminine attractive visage and his demonic one, and knew she was it.

She didn't have time to scream as he put a hand over her mouth.

Jamie

After they were done making out they sat back and looked at each other and Asha, with her hair blowing in the wind, looked free and sexy, like his first girlfriend so many years before. She had something fun and gleeful and spontaneous in her eyes and it had spread to all of her, every muscle and fiber. They had been acquaintances in high school and back then he never thought she'd be looking at him this way, now, right here. But life had a way of changing. People didn't stay the same.

She said she had to use the bathroom and got up and left, disappearing into the crowd.

He sat there and watched the people milling about, the carnival having lifted their moods, carried them out of that daily life trudge and misery. He felt uncharacteristically happy now – something he couldn't have said at any other point recently. He bought two beers, one for him and one for her. They could sit and watch the stars maybe. Maybe then go somewhere else, a restaurant or even to bed. Nothing seemed out of the realm of possibility.

But then she didn't come back. He waited a few minutes, looked at his phone, browsed through pictures of spouses, dinner and political articles on Facebook. She wasn't there. He looked around – maybe she was distracted by one of the booths, had just stopped to browse the colorful gaudy little carnival trinkets and toys...

No. Not that, either.

He took both of his beers and began to wander the carnival, conscious of his appearance, the lush walking with two alcoholic drinks. But then again this was the place for it. Everything was upside down here – everyone out in the open with their worst vices. Things began to take on an odd texture, everything seeming too bright and too loud. The carnival was thinning out, though. The people were moving towards the exit. Only Jamie stood there in the midway with two beers and no direction. The sky was without any stars. He didn't know why he'd thought there were any. He'd been wrong about that, too.

Bozo the Clown

The dirty rag in her mouth would stifle the screams. He'd bound her hands and she lay on the ground in the abandoned tent, still out cold. No one was around. It was the last day of the fair and they were packing up – a perfect time. It was how he'd planned. This had all gone like clockwork.

There was an electric, horrific energy about the whole tent and Bozo hadn't felt more awake maybe in his whole life, like he'd just drunk a coffee like an alcoholic shot. The night was black outside. It was like nothing else existed but them, right there under the red and yellow stripes...

Father Elroy was waiting in the parking lot in his big pickup truck, having always hated blood. He would help carry the body away, bound in the striped red-and-yellow tent's folds...

But there was the waiting first.

The waiting for the midnight hour to come – when the night turned stillest. That was when Ted told him was the most opportune to do the deed.

She was stirring now. He looked at her like a bug under a microscope. Something in her demeanor reminded him of the woman that had taken care of him in the foster home. Motherly, in a vague way. Something soft and vulnerable yet welcoming. She was realizing something was wrong. It always went this way. He waited too long and it was too late to turn back now, even if he wanted to.

Jamie

The fairground was almost deserted and Jamie ditched his beers. He looked around for a carnival worker, looked for the bright blue polos they wore, but there were none. How was that possible at all, he wondered? He looked at the black sky. The feeling of numbness that overcame him was total and complete. He'd never felt so damned useless in all his life, nothing now but a pile of awkward limbs frantically striking out, and a girl missing who had in some respect been in his care. She certainly was if he didn't find her. He'd be the only one left to explain. And he couldn't do that, couldn't explain a thing about any of this.

That ashamed him even more, then – the wave of regret as he realized that had been his first concern, and not her safety. That he'd thought first of what would happen after; not of saving her now.

He supposed he wasn't good for very much. But he couldn't leave now. He kept going, hoping some carnival worker would materialize and usher him out of the place so he could at least ask for help. But none came. The rides were all shutting down. Glowering neon lights diminishing to black, one by one. Just mechanical husks, obelisks frozen in place, and he felt so damned small among them. He would just waste more time if he kept looking for someone else to help – this was all on him.

The last light Jamie saw go out was at a tent way on the edge of the periphery – he had to squint to even see it; and it didn't seem to be even with the rest of the carnival. He hadn't noticed it earlier at all, he was sure of it. The tent had not been there.

Feeling a renewed sense of purpose, he walked toward the tent.

Bozo the Clown

He dragged the struggling girl to the edge of the tent, where the water was close and where the moon shone on her face. She made muffled noises of protest and he didn't listen. She stopped struggling as he stood over her and put his hands on her neck. He could see she had nice eyes. Big and brown and friendly. Like the woman from the foster care home. He could not remember her name, and this made him briefly very sad.

It was an uncharacteristic moment of weakness. He never paused for reflection. But he did so now. Perhaps it was the feeling of the end of the journey. The knowledge, like a warm blanket, that the fires would come soon and wash all of this away, the beautiful destruction of man, and all because of their ritual sacrifices. This was the last time. The work now almost done.

In the brief moment of reflection, he loosened his grip on her neck.

And that was when he felt the pair of hands on his back, pulling him around, and then there was a man punching him in the face, sending him reeling back. There was pain that shot through his head like thunder.

The man, white and skinny with an unshaven face, was untying the girl.

She was getting up, rubbing her sore wrists. He got in front of her – a protector. Like the old times. Like the Before when fire was new and there were no cities, survival of the fittest, man protects woman. He wanted to tell the man that this was how it could be again. The erasure of all man had done. All he needed was the one last sacrifice.

But the man would not understand. They never did. This man, the woman's protector, was a part of the same old system that perpetuated and went on and on.

So Bozo instead drew his knife. The blade gleamed in the dark.

Jamie

Asha was now safe behind him and the man in the clown outfit was stumbling at the edge of the lake, his mouth moving but no words coming. His makeup was running and now he looked even more grotesque than before – all muddied white face and gore-streaked red mouth, now sloppily dashed across the bottom of his face. The red bulbous nose was coming off, the strings becoming looser. He was looking at them with eyes full of murder. Then he drew the knife.

When he came running at them, Jamie thought for sure that he was about to die – this was it, really; the final end of it all. He braced himself for the endless black or, hell, whatever came next.

And then what did happen next was something entirely other.

He found his arms out in front of him and he grabbed the clown's arm holding the knife, holding him back. The clown was bigger, but Jamie had seemingly tapped into something. He'd heard about this before – a sudden burst of power, at the last moment, intended to defend against danger; usually in the context of a mother lifting a burning car to save a child. This was something strange and primal. It was in him now.

Whatever it was, Jamie let it happen. He held his ground against the clown, dug the backs of his shoes into the dirt and the mud. The clown pushed, too, and Jamie's arm trembled, but the knife did not move any closer – it stayed instead suspended in the air, the clown unable to push it down.

And Jamie kept pushing. Gritted his teeth and pushed the clown back, until he was actually moving the clown – which amazed Jamie so much he almost lost his grip. The knife started to come down. Jamie

strained his muscles and pushed more. He was starting to lose the grip. He issued mental apologies to his family, who he'd probably never see again. Then to Asha, who he'd unwittingly dragged into this – poor girl, he thought. He could feel the dark coming, creeping into his field of vision.

But Asha wasn't behind him anymore. It was only for a split second he realized this before Asha came up behind the clown with a large stick and whacked him over the head with it. He let out a grunt and stumbled back.

Jamie did not let go of the knife. He pushed forward and drove the knife through the fabric of the clown's suit, then through the flesh. At this, and the first sight of the blood that came, Jamie gasped, let go of the knife and stepped back. The clown, blood coming like a river, tilted his head toward the roof of the tent and let out a wordless scream of animal rage. It seemed to go on for a long time and was the worst thing Jamie had ever heard; just pure aural terror, the expression of a man slowly being immolated to nothing.

Asha was back by his side, then, the stick having dropped to the ground.

“Let's go,” she said, tugging at his arm. And Jamie did go, but first he watched the clown for another few moments, watched him fall to the ground and the life leave him, and felt something odd and strange and powerful well up in him – the feeling that he had overcome a predator. They were not in the normal realm of man's law anymore.

They were and they weren't.

In the parking lot, one of the last vehicles waiting was a white pickup truck with mud on the underbelly and on the wheels. And though they did not say a thing about it, both Jamie and Asha just thought there was something plain wrong about the truck – something from the blackest pits of human evil. They only got a brief glimpse of the man inside – pasty-white and heavysset – and he stared at them intently for a moment before putting his car in gear and driving away.

Jamie had his phone out. He dialed 9-1-1 and then they waited for the police to come while they stood and looked at the darkened fairgrounds.

Epilogue

The name of the man they'd killed would never be discovered, as he had no identification, nothing to clue the world as to who he was. The police filed him as a drifter, a nobody. Asha and Jamie gave their statements and told the police about the man in the truck, the man who'd just seemed goddamn wrong and there was a vaguely placating look about the cops' eyes – they didn't know what either of them

were on about, but they nodded and acted polite and wrote it down anyway. Trauma does odd things to the mind, they were likely thinking.

Then the cops took them back to the fairground where their cars were the last ones left in that dirt lot. Asha said she would call him later. He told her he would be okay if she didn't – he understood if she never wanted to see him again.

She smiled and punched his arm lightly. “C'mon, you kidding? This was a hell of a first date.”

“You're making light of it,” he said, the primal feeling leaving him like shower water down a drain. Now he just felt tired. The cool side of a pillow and a soft blanket had never felt like a more appealing idea.

“I'm fine,” she said, and in her face, flushed and wide awake, he could see the same primal feeling he'd felt – in her, it still lingered. “I'm glad we were able to get away.”

He nodded. “Call me. If you want to talk or something.” And he kissed her on the forehead as they parted.

The family gathering the next day was shaken ajar by the news of Jamie's bizarre and shocking incident. His mother treated him like he was a child again, asking if he wanted something every few minutes, doting upon him. Aunts he hadn't seen in years asked him if he was alright, if he needed to talk – offering selflessly to serve as a shoulder for him to lay his fears and worries. His uncles, drinking beers slow and relishing the taste, talked distractedly and occasionally glancing at him, as if expecting him to say something.

What they really wanted to know was, how did it feel, to have such an otherworldly experience? To kill a man?

He wanted to say it felt good. That he had never felt more alive. The feeling of that adrenaline rush had faded by then, but he would carry the remnant of it, the memory and the afterglow, for a long while to come, a secret nestled in him buried deep.