



Thomas McGonigle

The Glacial Carnival

...on the pretext of speaking of himself, had chosen to follow the path of imagination... and always with exemplary lack of respect for chronological order or sequences.

After all, and I repeat once again, to whom do I owe fidelity? Nobody owes fidelity to life. It confuses us and encumbers us from one end to the other.

-A man is living in room 801 of the Earle Hotel and is looking down at the corner of Washington Square that he can see to his left.

-He is not going to jump out of the window which is open on this sunny day.

-At least not today, he is pretty sure.

-On the narrow balcony, more decorative and not designed to be stood upon, he has put three paper bagged cold quart bottles of Ballentine Ale below the other window of his room hoping they will remain chilled until this evening when he will want to be drinking from them.

-The room to the left side of where he is standing is vacant today. He has been told Bob Dylan once lived there, way back when...

-He has been told that the room he is in, 801, was where Lenny Bruce lived.

-Today, Lenny Bruce is mostly forgotten as soon enough most people will be so why even mention him: yet... once upon a time: Lenny Bruce was... but enough of that for right now...

-He had gone to live in the hotel as he had no place else to go. He had come back from Europe having used up the small sum of money the death of his father had left him with.

-He had lived on his sister's couch for a period of time and then he had lived on the top shelf of a loft bed in a studio apartment on Horatio Street.

-In that studio apartment there is a rule: once you had entered the place you were allowed only to stand up when you were ready to leave. This applied to: Harry, Wayne, you—she said pointing to me—and of course, Richard and her own cousin as well as Charlie and when Danny Byrd... and who else?.. Angela...

-People walked into the studio and crawled out... about the only difference it came to him between the cockroaches and the humans... the roaches had more legs...

-All of this is close to the furniture of the life of the person now writing this in the third person.

-He had seen his life do something or other at the same time as the bicentennial of the United States of America. But this is not the story of a country.

-In the room, with a green ceiling and beige walls, that was to the left as you got off the elevator and walking the short corridor passing by a room to your right and to your left so that when you came to the end of the corridor and turning to the right, key in lock,

entering his room he is aware that there is another room behind his back which had the corner of the building, so windows with a better view of the park.

-Door closed. The world was outside the door.

TWO

--On a bright June day I was walking down MacDougal Street from West 8th Street, crossing Waverly Place and in the shadow of the Hanging Tree I turned around and looked up to the top of what was now called the Washington Square Hotel and saw a man high up, no longer a young man, climb out of a window just above the appearance of the narrow balcony and step boldly into the air.

--I turned away as I did not want to see what had produced a terrible thud at street level. I kept walking south.

THREE

-You gotta have that---

-hint of nostalgia---

-if you had been in The Village *back then*

-Charles Conklin, who everyone called Charlie, but some reason or no reason Lilia and I always called Charles. told me that over at Donovan & O'Leary Funerals on 14th Street, they had the contract for taking care of the corpses, remains, if you please, of those who died with identification on them and no one claimed them.

---Had to make a delivery to them of cardboard boxes and asked the guy what for?

---Stick the stiffs in them--- and they truck 'em over to Jersey to get burnt.

---Never keep an ID on you. Then at least you leave behind a bunch of pictures and get a bit of a whole in Potter's Field.

---And yeah: before it gets lost, Charles was saying--- we once or twice came close to this--- when you sell your blood be sure to take along a brown ink pencil. I grew an army of those brown spots. They need blood so bad they'd take it out of your balls. Get that pen. It gives you a little extra cash. Never trade near the same blood snake, you get a lousy price. Keep yourself clean. Remember your mother saying you're never too poor to buy a bar of soap.

-Sort of a party always begins slowly what with Charles having to provide his own food for his own birthday party in The Village Paddock.

-You know where?

-Right across from the Corner Bistro. It became a fish restaurant and something else after that.

-Everybody is mostly dead from back then.

-Or on the way.

-He had to round up his own guests.

-Plan the music provided by The Village Legend, Al Fields. Everybody back then knew Al Fields. He played piano in a lot of bars and even for The Clash but they cut him out of the actual record...that sort of guy.

"Some people say you have a messiah complex, " I say.

"Aw, fuck them. Goddamn psychiatric doubletalk. Why can't they just say they hate my guts or something? People who need reasons to hate somebody are fulla shit. Buncha creeps. Who said that, anyway? -- Hey, look, that guy was wrong. It ain't in the left-hand corner, it's in the *right*-hand corner! This whole goddamn joint is *nuts*."

A few hours later, we are in the Bells of Hell, a couple of blocks from Corby's, on Thirteenth Street. I go take a leak. When I come back to the bar, I find Patti in dialogue with Al Fields, the Bells piano-player whose legend extends in rays for many blocks, if not as far as the cold planet, Pluto.

"Hey, nigger, " Al, who is himself the only patron of color in the establishment, calls to the bartender, "this girl don't believe I was raised by nuns! You tell her, am I right or am I wrong. I'm Al Fields, girl, and I don't lie. Shit! Is a pork chop greasy?!"

Patti goes to the jukebox. "Hey, they got my record. No 'New Mexican Puppeteer, ' though." She plays two Rolling Stones records.

"Hey, you ain't related to her, are you?" Al Fields asks me in his typhoon whisper. "What is it, she got somethin' against nuns? Shit, I'm Al Fields, the Village Legend. You know what I'm talkin'

about. Am I right, am I wrong? No, really, she's a very nice girl. She come to hear me play?" He excuses himself and heads toward the men's room. "I gotta go pay my water bill."

-Sitting up there at the piano on a platform near the front of a bar then, devoted to horses and baseball. No patrons wanna watch football. Babe Ruth on the wall.

-Jerry Foley, white hair treasures his NEW YORK TIMES--- gotta know the Democratic schemes getting cooked up.

-Foley's sister sits in the bar in the afternoons, one leg up on a stool next to her own, suffering from President Nixon's disease making sure Sally doesn't pocket too much. She is watching over Sally, the day bartender, whose husband is a terminal drunk up in a hospital next to Potter's Field. He has his reasons, Sally says. He had been in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain. Was out of work for years after that. It was/wasn't his fault: like a lotta guys from the Village, he went off to Spain--- he had a conscience, I think.

---Sally looks like a pinkish gray walnut, Charles said once. That's just the way it is.

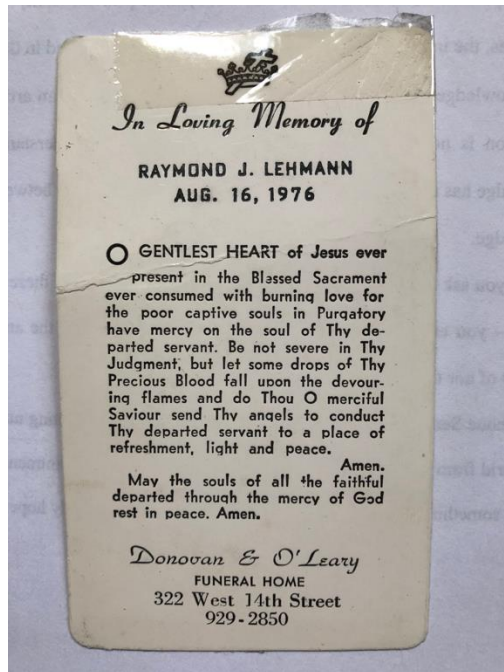
-Charlie's Party:

-Now the evening and Sally is on this side of the bar and Ray has taken over: an old fashioned white haired bartender in red jacket, black tie and white shirt.

-Only bartender who knows what a Bronx is.

-Find out for yourself. Do some research.

-Like the Trinity if you ask me. A mystery.



-Charles lives across the street next to the deli in a ground floor room. He doesn't want to come to his own party unfortified. He's mixing wine and whiskey. He had the veal stew cooking. I have a beer. He's worried none of his three wives will show up. Not even his kids. I called one of their mothers up and she yelled at me. Maybe his cousin and his sister from over in Bank Street and maybe the dame from Staten Island. Don't let on what I have told you about that dame, you know I had to bring along a dildo when she wanted me to do it...I can't do it as long as she needs. She's sensitive about some things.

---Come on Charles, don't want to be late for your own party.

-He's cleaned up the place a little. Cleared off the dresser top. The cigarette burns are visible. He has all the empty cans and bottles in a bag in the corner. His record player is busted. A couple of years ago it fell off the back of a truck if you know what I mean and now it's really busted. I tripped, he says.

-Charles has lousy taste in clothes. He tried to give me a three-piece pink suit. He shops out of the back of trucks. His brother is in that racket. He's a cheapskate. I know where he gets the stuff so fuck him. He still wants to charge me.

---We have to finish painting this place, Charles is telling me. The landlord gave him some gallons of paint and we started to paint the place. But didn't get too far. Went across the street to the bar. He told me you only gotta be careful when painting to cover up the

spots people look at: right in front of their noses and in corners high up. People always look there. That's all you gotta cover.

-Charles, let's be going. People want to see you. Lilia is going to be there. All your friends.

---How I love you bastards. Even when I was drunk in your place and fell down I didn't break anything, did I?

---You didn't, Charles. That's when Lilia set up the rule: no walking round in her place, you gotta crawl, less possibility of damaging anything.

---Let's be going. I'll carry the pot and you bring the bread.

---I wish it was more but what's a bastard like me to do?

---Don't worry about it.

---It's always been like that.

---Like what.

-Like you say hate 'em all but love 'em all in spite of their fucking selves.

THE BEGINNING OF THE PARTY

-*The Village Legend* came up with a large paper tablecloth which said HAPPY BIRTHDAY too many times and he even put out some plastic forks, paper napkins and plastic knives.

-Distraction: According to Danny Byrd, Al Fields is a house nigger and Danny Byrd being a field nigger knows the difference and nobody can fool a field nigger. Have you ever met a field nigger with no money? We always got money in our pocket and don't let no one tell you different.

-Danny Bird says happy birthday to Charles. Danny has a gimpy green eye and a blue eye. Charles doesn't like having him here at his party— I get along with colored guys and have always worked with them— sometimes they get the short end and sometimes you get the short end but they get the short end more frequently--- you follow me--- but Danny's another sort of something or other but Lilia likes Danny and Charles likes Lilia but Al Fields, *The Village Legend*... what can I do, he plays the music and we needs the music.

-Charles throws out his arms, we needs the music.

-Ray is saying, Charles calm down. We're going to have a nice party for you so you gotta behave.

-How I love that bastard, Charles says, even Al Fields, even if he is a nigger and a lousy piano player, *The Village Legend*. So much

for mythology.

-Setting: Dark mahogany bar, dark paneling, a large mirror with angular black designs behind the bottles: row on row of a choir, you could say, a large rectangular front room divided halfway by a fence of wood and clouded glass. A juke box at the rear end of the bar, an entrance way with no steps: Jerry doesn't want any lawsuits--- and then a long narrow room leading to the toilets and office.

-Everybody was fifty years older than Lilia and I but that was okay. You get tired of looking at yourself when you go someplace. The liquor bottles were like a choir and you could see the backs of their heads in the mirror behind the bar: repeating, just what bars are all about, repeating this and that and this and that.

-History I: But people hang around the front room close to the food. Once upon a time, it was said Kitty, Foley's sister, the one who's dead, served meals in the bar. If you didn't clean your plate you weren't allowed back in again, even for a drink. She took it personal. Her legs gave out and if you can't cook food then there was no reason.

-History II: They say, whoever they is, Edward Albee used to live upstairs above the bar and now there are two stories about that other guy, James Baldwin, he was in one night with a man and woman: so story one, a sailor took offense at his sitting with a white woman and Baldwin learned the racist nature again of America on the floor of the bar or story two, Baldwin tried to make a pass at a sailor and sailor was with his wife, same result: take your pick.

-A physical detail: Charles had one desperate sad brown eye, even on paydays when there had been a lot of overtime. The other eye was covered with a flesh-colored patch which he probably worried about slipping off, but easier than having a pirate eye... if you know what I mean...

-Something else: Did I tell you the story about the time the bar got robbed and we all got shoved into the toilet by this guy with a gun? That's another story. An ordinary afternoon in the middle of the week, who would have thought...t but it was happening all the time, luckily no one got hurt. The robbers never got caught as usually happens, no one could describe them, even the cops didn't bother to ask each one of us, what are they going to do, it was just one of those things that happen and no one got hurt and there

wasn't a lot of money in the register and they didn't push that...

The Party:

-Lilia kissed Charles on the cheek for his birthday.

---Do it on the cheek where I can see your eyes and I'll buy you a drink and she did and Thomas if you do that I'll kick the shit out of you--- excuse the language--- from here to Hoboken, do you want a drink?

---Let me buy you one, Charles.

---This cheap Irish bastard's buying me a drink.

-The food was on the table. Lilia liked the veal stew. Once Charles fell into a pot of it which he was making late at night--- he told us this--- that's the risk you take in the line of work, you step into a shower, slip, crack your head and are dead and you take a risk if you take a drink and you take a risk taking a breath, sometimes.

-Charles kissed his sister hello. I love this girl, he is saying, she took me out of the gutter too many times when I was so low I couldn't sell my blood.

-His nephew clapped him on the back and his brother shook his hand.

-Charles will have a (he made a screwing like gesture with his hand) drink into his hand.

-So many people had shown up.

-Muscular buddies from work with wives who never left the house.

-No children luckily.

-Charles didn't like to see kids in bars. Drink makes you into a child so why have children present?

-Lilia and I drifted to the back of the bar. Danny Byrd was trying to lay drink on us for some reason.

-He succeeded.

-Caroline showed up.

-Charles was kissing her on the cheek, as she would, I was told, in the funeral parlor, when last in the box without eye patch, I am, he said, she would be doing this saying, here's how to kiss a dead man, you will do it well, what you learned in New Orleans where young people know how to kiss the dead.

-A photographer was taking pictures blurred in the bad bar light so Charles was not photographed.

-*Charles's literary remains*. It was his party. He was lost in the poor light as was his scribbling about the man who was arrested for

driving drunk a wheelchair down Hudson Street.

-Charles put on his red and white checkerboard hat and tries to sing *Smokes Gets in Your Eyes*.

-Stops and starts again, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

-Lilia applauded.

-Charles had to go back to his room across the street. He was embarrassed by crying and singing. -I went after him. He was drinking from a small sugared bottle of whiskey.

---I'm so scared he says.

---But they love you, Charles.

---Who can love a one-eyed man?

---That's just self-pity.

---I don't care what it is because it's what I feel. People never tell you the truth.

---Come back to your party, Charles. Have some of your food.

---Is the stew good?

---It always is.

---Did Lilia like it?

---Yes, so come back.

---I don't believe you but people talk, they always talk even about people they don't know.

(of course I knew why... so none of that cheap suspense: Charles and I had been walking along 14th Street. I had met him after work at the Eagle at 9th and 14th. They didn't know him there but it was a good bar, he said, they bought you back after the third drink. He was tired: it had been a ball-busting day. The trucking company's going broke and I told Lenny to put us on short weeks. Spread the work around. Everybody needs a bone. At least we'd all be working. Nah, Lenny says. We'll see what happens. Nothing's going to happen. It's closing down. He says it's cheaper to work out of Jersey. I can't go back to that place. Ten years of my life stuck there with my third wife. She worked me over. I was a cook then, a damn good cook and it didn't matter. I had to get out of there and came back here. There's no more chances for me... and we go along to P. Kelly's and he pays back a slouched over lump of cloth some money. You got to pay your debts... the place where I work smells like dead meat and it just ain't been buried and there's no room for a one-eyed freak...

-I try to tell him he ain't and he says, open your eyes, boy, open your eyes.

-Charles did come back and he had another small bottle of something in his back pocket.

-Ray was too cheap to buy him a drink. We sell drinks in this bar even on birthdays.

-We were all broke by then waiting for something to happen.

-There were a lot of people in the bar who Charles didn't know and Al Fields *The Village Legend* said they came to hear him play and let me play my music he said and he played something from the big fake book he kept on the piano, who knows what it was, just blurred into the sounds of people shouting and having a good time.

-Charles fell against the wall of the bar and looked like he would hit the floor but didn't: I don't hit floors, he was saying, and Al *The Village Legend* was picking him up and got him seated.

---My muscles have gone out, he says. My sister, I would like to dance with you. Please.

---Charles, please. What has happened to you?

---I am happy.

---That's no excuse.

---My birthday only comes once in a decade or something like that.

---That's no excuse, if I had my way I wouldn't have come but your nephew said you wanted to see me.

---Charles, can you buy me a drink, Lilia asks, and he says of course for you I can buy you a drink and I'm not buying him a drink since he doesn't drink *screws* and Danny Byrd is saying loudly, I am buying drinks even for him--- pointing--- because he knows Danny Byrd is saying I am married to his wife even if he says he's married to Lilia and no one knows what it all can mean and Mable is telling me she had been a lithographer for years and is now not working and her husband is dead and here you can see a picture of him in his casket...

THE END.

Something must have happened.
Where did the time go?
Do you know what happened?
Do you? How should I know?
I look up and Charles was taken home half an hour ago...

ANOTHER DAY

-Another day, who knows which one, no one is counting. It must have been around 10:30 AM and I was walking by The Village Paddock on my way over to Bleecker Street because I was supposed to be painting the halls and stairwell of a building... that's another dumb story...and Charles was sitting on a chair in front of the bar. He was sitting on a dirty towel that was soaked with a lot of blood on it. The phone didn't work so I came over here and Jerry wouldn't let me in--- it started bleeding last night, some time, I woke up and there was blood coming out of my asshole what else can I call it, there was blood on everything and Jerry wouldn't let me in when I banged on his door but he said he would call an ambulance... it wouldn't stop: the bleeding... I don't know why and Jerry didn't want me dying or anything in his place --- then they close you down--- you got to know these things at least he called an ambulance and gave me a chair to sit on and then the ambulance came and I don't now what we were saying and they took Charles to St Vincent's and Jerry came out to get his chair back and he said you can't have people dying in your place: they close you down for weeks if that happens.

-Later, I called the hospital and had to say I was a brother when I asked after him and they told me to hold the line and another voice same on who said in one of the formal tones which you can't answer: Mr Charles Conklin had died from internal bleeding that couldn't be stopped, but that is unofficial pending... I hung up, what could I say...

-AND THE BOOK STOPS right there for a moment....

Thomas McGonigle is author of *St. Patrick's Day: another day in Dublin* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), *The Corpse Dream of N. Petkov* (Dalkey Archive, 1987 and Northwestern University Press, 2000), and *Going to Patchogue* (Dalkey Archive, 1992). He has written for *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsday*, *The Guardian* (London) *Bookforum*, and *The Village Voice*.