

Gus Edwards



Calypso Man's Blues

A NOVEL (EXCERPT)

All of this happened a long time ago during the dark ages when Rock n' Roll was just being born. When Pan American Airways ruled the world of travel. When the beach scene in From Here to Eternity set a new standard for sex on the screen and a honey colored singer with a sugar-cured voice exploded on the scene with a best selling album called Calypso.

This was the 1950s, a long time gone by.

I

ILLEGAL

Dear Scobbo,

I know you must be thinking bad bout me because I say I would write but then I don't write. The thing is I been busy. Busy like a dog. This St. Ursula place everybody so excited about ain't easy you know. No man, it ain't easy at all. See, it easy for the people who born here. They ain't got no worry. They born under the American flag. And when you born that way you ain't got no worry. You can just sit on your ass all day and Uncle Sam will pay your bills. But is people like me who got to work. Got to bust ass to make two ends meet. We is the aliens. We is the outsiders. We is the fucking foreigners. And these people don't like us. They think just because they is Americans their shit don't stink. So they call us all kinds of names like "Garrots" and "shit mullets" and things like that. And they even write Calypso songs about us that say things like: "Poor islanders go back where you come from."

You see, they think God smile on them because America take over this island years ago and put the Navy base here. Now the Navy base gone but America still holding on to the place and giving them Government money. So these people think ain't nobody can touch them, talk to them, or fuck with them at all.

Now I don't say nothing, but I know for a fact that these people black like me, ugly like me and their asshole is as stink and dirty as mine. And if I know anything, I know that Americans don't like

black people. No sir, they don't like them at all. Sometimes they pretend to like us if they want to get something from us, or if they want us to do work for them. But other than that, them people would rather kick us in our ass than say "Good morning." But these St. Ursulans think just because they got the American flag flying in the wind, that the Americans who come down here smiling up in their face, like them... Well if they want to be ignorant, that's their business. As for me, I ain't saying a word.

I told you I been busy and I ain't lying. From the night after I sneak off that boat, I been working. To tell you the truth I didn't even have a good night rest. Captain Armstrong dock the vessel at four in the afternoon and told us to hide under the sugar sacks. There was three of us. Me and two other fellows. One fellow was sick the whole way over and kept leaning over the side of the boat to throw up all the food he had in he belly. Everybody laugh. But when he had to be crouched up under them sugar bags with Vinnie and me and he start throwing up again, it wasn't so funny. Because we had to stay there, not making a sound, smelling it... We could hear people moving round upstairs. We could hear voices even. It was the immigration people checking to see if they didn't have any "illegals" as they like to call people like me. I could hear Captain Armstrong saying, "You can search the boat if you all like. But I don't traffic in *stoways* or illegals. I is a legitimate boat captain and my business is transporting merchandise." But them immigration people wasn't listening too much. They still searching the boat from top to bottom. And they mighta even been look behind all them sugar bags where we was hiding if it wasn't for the smell of that puke that Carl had vomit up earlier. I could hear one immigration man saying, "What's back there?" And Captain Armstrong saying, "Just sugar bags."

"What is that smell?"

"I don't know sir. A rat or something musta die there."

"Well it smell terrible. Let's get out of here." And they all went back upstairs.

Later that night, round eleven o'clock, Captain Armstrong come down to tell us that the coast was clear. We went upstairs and a man named Lanclos take us in a truck and drive us up into the hills. The night was hot and although there was some light everything look dark around us. I didn't care. I was glad to be off that boat and glad not to be smelling like puke any more. All I wanted was a good night's sleep. That was all. A good night's sleep.

Lanclos stop us in a yard and show us to the back room of a ramshackle house. As my back hit the floor I was fast asleep and thanking God for it.

But the shit was, I wasn't sleeping two or three hours when a man was ringing a bell telling us to wake our lazy asses up.

"Wha? What going on?" we ask. "Work!" the man say. "You people don't think you here for your good looks, do you? You here to work. And that's what I's taking you to. The job. Outside in the truck we got coffee, but that's all you get for free. Everything else you pay for."

Somebody ask, "What time is it man?" because it was still dark outside "Four o'clock," the man tell us. And that's when our day begin. Four o'clock in the fucking morning. They take you in a truck, give you pick ax and shovels, and you start digging. You dig and you shovel and you move rock and you cut down trees and you drink water and you piss and you dig some more and you watch out for snakes and bugs and spiders and all kinds of other things. And at the end of the day they take you back in the truck to that ramshackle house where a big fat ugly ass black woman with titties flopping down her belly cook whatever she feel in the mood for and feed it to everybody. All twenty one of us. Then we listen to the radio, drink if we want to and go to sleep. That's how it was for the first six months I been here. These people work us and pay us spit. Is some kind of contract they got with the government for cutting country roads. The government don't care who they hire or how much they pay. So long as the work get done, that's all they care about. These people pay us pee pee and charge us for our food and the dirty room we staying in. Now, we don't have to stay there. We could move any time we like. Trouble is, none of us have any amount of money to move because town ain't cheap. Plus, if you go in town and they find out you is a illegal, they putting you in jail and shipping you right back.

So you see, Scobbo, people on St. Albans think St. Ursula is paradise. But it ain't shit. Not if you ain't born here. Not if you is one of us. But I gon persevere and I gon make it. I don't care what they do or what they try. I gon make it because I is a man with ambition. And that gon be the secret of my success. Fucking, fucking ambition.

Tell your sister Sylvie hello. And your mother too. You people was good to me and I ain't forget bout you. Just because I didn't write that don't mean I ungrateful. I just mean I'm busy.

Talk to you soon,
Archie

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A CALYPSO MAN

Hey Scobbo Man,

I know, I know. I ain't write for six months so you all give me up for dead. But I ain't dead. I here man. I here. And I got good news to tell you. I don't work in the countryside no more, digging ditches and gutters on the side of the road. I done with that. I show it my ass and I gone. But you wouldn't guess what I is doing now. Don't even try because you wouldn't be able to... I singing Calypso. That's right, I singing Calypso and getting pay for it too. And I even got a new name to go with it. My stage name is "King Mighty." And when people ask me, "Mighty what?" I say, "A mighty man with a song."

I can hear you laughing already, saying, "But he can't sing for fart." But what I say to that is, "If

I can't sing, why is they paying me?"

Well to tell you the truth, I got the job as a kind of fluke. One weekend night me and some other garrot boys come into town to booze up a little as we like to do when we finish our work for the week and still have a little bit a payroll money in our pocket. We was in our usual rumshop, a lil dirty place called Bosco's. I got to talking to this other garrot name Ralphie. He tell me that he was quitting this road work and I ask he why. He said for me not to tell nobody, but he was gon be moving in town and getting a job as a busboy or waiter at this new night club that was gon be opening up. I ask him how he hear bout the job and he tell me, "through a friend." I ask he if he think I might be able to get a job at the same place. He tell me he didn't know but I could ask the man if I like. Then he give me the name of the boss, a white man name Bob Blick.

That next Tuesday afternoon I fake like I was sick to get out of the road work and hitch hike my way to town after I change out of my dirty work clothes.

In town I find the place. Carpenters and painters and mason men was still working there but the man already had his sign up. It say: *Bob Blick's Carnival Club*. I went in and ask for Mr. Blick. This skinny white man come over to me. "Yes, what can I do for you?" Well, just before he walk over to me I had heard him saying to somebody on the telephone, "What I need is a Calypso singer. That's what I need. Somebody whose picture I can put in the showcase out front and I can advertise on the radio. No, I don't want a Latino singer or a pop singer. A Calypso man is what I'm looking for. Now don't call me unless you have one, okay? Things are crazy enough around here." It was after that when he come to me and say, what can I do for you.

"I looking for a *job* sir."

"What kind of work."

"Calypso singing, sir."

"Calypso singing?"

"Yes sir."

"Where are you from?"

"Trinny, sir. Trinidad. I used to sing Calypso in Trinidad. But since I come here I ain't been having much luck."

"What is your name?"

"Archie, Archibald De Witt. But my professional name is King Mighty. King Mighty the First. That is the name I use when I singing."

"King Mighty, huh?"

"Yes sir."

"You got any pictures, any clippings, anything that tells me you are what you say you are?"

"No sir. I leave most of the stuff in Trinny. I figure that I would get a whole new start here."

"So I have only your word and that's it."

"Well you can try me out, sir. Let me sing a little bit for you. See what you think."

"Do you accompany yourself or do you need a band?"

"I used to play the quartro. But I had to sell it when I move to here."

"Where did you play in Trinidad? Would I have heard of any of the places?"

"I don't think so, sir. They was mostly rumships, nightclubs, and beach outings. But I was in Calypso Tents once. And I come out fourth."

"Have you cut any records?"

"No sir. I couldn't find a producer."

"But you were doing okay in Trinidad."

"I was making a living."

"So why did you come here?"

"Because Trinidad is full of Calypso singers. They got more Calypso singers than they got dog on that island. Only a few can get big. Not everybody. Only a few. So I come here because I might stand a better chance."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty eight."

"Archie, I don't know if you're lying to me or not, but I'm going to give you a chance. Friday night we're having a little party, just for my friends. It's sort of a pre-opening party. There's going to be a band here. Harry Bang and His Rhythm Boys. You heard of them?"

"Yes sir."

"The party starts at eight. They're going to be here around five to set up and rehearse. Come by then and work with them. And when the party is in session I want you to sing two sets. That'll be your audition. After I hear you, then I'll decide if I can use you or not."

"Right."

"Friday afternoon."

And that's how it start. I hitch back up the country and walk on the beach all night practicing every Calypso song I know. All them songs we used to sing when we was in school. I know if I had to I could accompany myself on the quartro. My Uncle Charles show me how to play it. I can't play it good but I could play a little bit. I know how to strum chords and for me, that's enough.

Anyway I went back that Friday afternoon and practice with the band. Harry Bang the leader told me up front that he didn't like Trinidadians and I told him up front that he could kiss my battie. After that we get along real good. Of course the joke in all of this is that I ain't even from Trinidad. But I had to say that because everybody know that's where all the Calypso singers come from.

I sing in the mike and the band had trouble staying up with me. Harry told me to slow down. So that's what I do... This was the first time in my life I ever sing with a band. Now you and I know that. But they didn't. And every time they would stop and say, "You singing off key," or "singing too

fast," I would say, "I never had no trouble with Cyril Diaz in Trinidad or the Calypso Rhythmmakers from Jamaica. I sing with them and they never complain. What's wrong with you boys?" So we work and work and had three songs I could sing with them smooth. By the time the party was on, I was putting movement and style in the way I was singing them songs.

Oh, you shoulda seen this place. White men and white women laughing up and talking, and drinking and slapping one another on they back. I sing my three numbers, but I don't think anybody was paying much attention. Harry Bang play and people dance. I sit up on the stage just smiling and clapping my hands. There was a lot of pretty women in the place. Women that make you want to jump off the stage and put you hands all over them. But I didn't do nothing like that. I just sit there smiling and clapping my hands with the music.

At the next set, I sing again. This time Bob Blick and some friends sit at the table right in front of the bandstand. After Harry finish playing his saxophone, I went to the mike and did my three numbers. Then Mr. Blick wave to me to come down and join them. So that's what I do.

"Archie here was auditioning tonight," he say to his friends. "What do you think? Should I hire him or not?"

"Oh yes. Definitely," this white woman with a big mouth and a lot of white hair said. "He's wonderful. Wonderful. Best Calypso singer I've heard." You could see she was drunk. Real drunk. So nobody was paying too much mind to her. But the others said "Yes" too. Then Bob look at me and said, "Well, there you have it. The vote is in. I guess you're hired. Come by Monday at ten, we'll talk about salary and contracts."

"Yes sir."

"And Archie, one more thing."

"Sir?"

"Are you legal or illegal?"

"Illegal, sir."

"Okay, okay. Talk to me Monday."

See, I figure I better tell the truth about that. Because somehow or other he will probably find out later on and then I'll be in more trouble.

When I went home I wonder to myself, "Why did I tell the man I was a Calypso singer?" I guess it was because I had heard him on the phone saying that he was looking for one. And I figure to myself, How hard can it be, singing Calypso? Every low dog gutter rat from the island I know singing Calypso, so why not me?

That Monday I went by and we sign a contract. One hundred dollars a week, plus dinner and three drinks from the bar. The contract is for six months unless he decide to fire me sooner.

"We have to do something about your immigration status," he say to me.

“What?”

“Confront it. Those people can give you a lot of trouble and a lot of grief if they catch you. So I’ll call and report it tomorrow. I’ll say I hired you and get a work permit for you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

That opening night Ralphie was working cleaning up tables behind the waiters.

“I didn’t know you was a singer,” he say to me.

“Oh, I been a singer a long time. I just didn’t tell nobody, that’s all.”

I could see that he didn’t believe me, but I don’t care. Fuck he. What is he anyway? A goddamn busboy. Me, I’m a singer. King Mighty. And I got my picture out front to prove it.

The last time you write you told me bout trying to get that government job. Did you get it?

I have a new address as you can see at the top of this letter. You can write me there. But I think that I’s going to move again. So what I might do is get a post office box. That way no matter where I living you can still write to me.

Say Hello to everybody,

Archie

Now “King Mighty” too

Scobbo, Scobbo, Scobbo!

I writing you quick because I don’t want you to say that since I come this big shot singer celebrity I ain’t been thinking bout my friends. Of course I joking bout the celebrity part, but things ain’t too bad. No man, it ain’t been too bad at all. I singing and practicing and learning songs. They got a picture a me outside in front of the club and a picture of the band too. And the sign underneath say, “*Harry Band and the Rhythm Boys — featuring the Calypso Singing Sensation of Trinidad King Mighty 2 Shows Nightly at 9:00 p.m. and at 11:00 p.m. Come one, Come all. At Bob Blick’s, it’s Carnival every night!*” The place is doing okay for a new club. During the week we a little bit empty but on weekends we get a nice crowd. Especially on Saturday night. Harry, who work in a lot of nightclubs, say he don’t think this place gon last. He say for a place this size to make any kind of money we got to be doing a lot more business. Maybe he right, maybe he wrong. I don’t know. But what I know is that Harry Bang is a ignorant ass. He ain’t a bad musician, and play a good saxophone, but he ignorant like a rock. And he ugly too. You should see this man Scobbo. He short and black and he got a big head, a big belly and some thin, skinny legs. He look like a damn black frog with them big eyes a his. And he never smile. Always got a mean expression on his face like he stomach giving him trouble or he smelling

something bad all the time. The rest of the boys in the band ain't bad. Most of them is quiet and sensible except for the conga player named Costa. He is kind of a asshole too. So I don't say much to him. But Harry so ignorant and so sour that I don't believe too much of what he tell me bout anything. Especially bout the fact that the club ain't making enough money to last.

Mr. Bob Blick don't seem too worried neither. Most nights he sit at the bar and drink with his friends or girlfriend. He don't say much to us except to every once in a while come over and say, "Good show, fellows. Good show." Or sometimes when things is real, real slow he might come over and say, "It doesn't seem to make much sense to do a second show tonight. There's just not enough people. Why don't we just pack it in?"

I know I tell you he was funny looking and stuff but he's a nice man to work for. The waiters and bartender say that he does get on them from time to time. Ralphie, the one who tell me bout the job, he already quit. Say he ain't making enough. Where he gone to, I don't know. But Mr. Blick don't bother us musicians. He leave us alone completely.

Now Mr. Blick is funny. He got a girl friend. A heavy set white woman that come by to see him a lot. But people tell me he's a anti-man, so I don't know what to make of it. On one hand, he got this woman who come by to see him. They kiss and sit and talk and stuff. Then on the other hand, he got fellows who by too. And they hug him and talk in high voice and whisper in his ear and touch him on his leg and stuff. And some nights he leave with them early, saying they going other places to drink and stuff. But Harry say that ain't so. "They going some place to fuck and suck one another. That white man is a anti-man. And all his friends is anti-man too."

"Then what about his girlfriend Genna?"

"She is anti too. She is a anti-woman. You could see that in her face. That woman is a bull dagger. He ain't fucking she, he licking she. I work in hotels and clubs all over the place and I know white people. Especially American white people. They is nasty people man. All of them. Nasty." But like I tell you Scobbo, Harry Bang is a ignorant fucker, so I listen but I don't believe even half of anything he got to say.

But this a new world to me, man. And I see a lot of things I ain't seen before. And Harry, dumb as he is, ain't too wrong bout the anti-man business. They got a lot of them around. A whole, whole lot. All of them is white and a lot of them is good looking. And they like to go out with island boys. I hear the fellows talking and they say these white men pay them for the island boys to sex them like they was woman. And when they giving it to them they cry out and moan and beg for the boys to give it to them harder. I can't believe that because I don't understand why a man would want to be like a woman. I understand that if there ain't no woman around a man might get to fooling with another man pretending to hisself that that man is a woman or a girl. We used to do a little bit of that up in the country because there wasn't too much girls around. But the minute we could get a woman we done with that. But these fellows here don't want women. It got a lot of women running

Calabash

around. Pretty women, but they don't want them. And they don't want other white men neither. Is black boys they want. Is rusty ass looking dark boys they after, telling them how good looking they is, how wonderful they skin is and stuff like that. The boys tell me they like to see their money first. And that they won't let them white man kiss them. They will let them do other things for that money, but they won't let them kiss them. Sometimes when the boys is in a bad mood they beat up the white man after they finish sexing them. And they don't beat them up for a reason. Is just the fact that they don't like them. They say when a man lay hisself to be like a woman like that, it make them mad and disgusted. So they punch him up. Punch them up hard just to tell them they shouldn't be like that. A man is a man and he shouldn't try to act like a goddamn woman. But the other side of that is they tell me that there is some men who ask the boys to beat them up. Can you imagine that? Can you believe it? But they tell me it's true. But like I telling you, this is a new world to me. A whole, whole new world.

Now since I been singing at this place (it been nearly a month already. Can you believe that?), a few fellows try to proposition me. Sometimes they invite me to the bar to have a drink with them. Sometimes they ask if I want to take a ride with them in the country. This one man name Morey, who like to come in the club every night, he ask me that question. When I tell him, "I don't think so," he say to me, "What are you afraid of? Me or yourself?" I said to the man, "Look, I know what you is about. And I don't play that." Know what he say to me, Scobbo? Know what the man say to me? He smile and say, "Don't knock it till you've tried it. Who knows, you might like it. You might even want to make it your way of life." I didn't say nothing because I didn't know what to say to the man. So I just say, "Excuse me," and I leave. That was it. I just leave.

They say this island having some kind of tourist boom. And you see them all over. Tourist people with straw hats and sun glasses. Big cruise ships come in three and four times a week and the tourist them spread out all over the island taking taxis and spending money. We ain't getting much a that action in the club at night. Because by the time we open all of them already gone back to the ship. Mr. Blick say business gon pick up when the word around. And he promise to do some radio advertising too. So as you can see everything is going along good. Real good. You still didn't answer me about that government job. Say hello to everybody.

