

James Carmichael



This Place

THIS IS GOING TO BE DÉJÀ VU: SEEN IT, DONE THAT, BEEN THERE. We are here at the reception desk of this posh hotel in the isle of St. Lucia listening to an ever-smiling smartly attired activities hostess recommending enthusiastically that my wife Vicki and I take a five-minute drive in the next north-bound route taxi and find ourselves on this Friday night in a place called Gros Islet.

Looking at her there smiling with all her face, Vicki and I exchange a quick glance that confirms we agree upon this one: Ríó, Baxter's Road, Maracas Bay, Gros Islet, whatever you say; the names change but the ingredients vary but slightly. This is Caribbean standard fare: good food, gyrating music, and a splash of rum, all beneath a balmy tropical sky. *Please madam, no need to preach to the converted.* We'll go to this place, just to say we went, to add to our small-talk repertoire in the office-lunch room while drinking instant coffee and quietly competing with one another to establish who had the best vacation and did the most exotic thing.

So... get in that north-bound route taxi, take that five-minute ride and get off at this place which, despite its tempting French name, seems no more exotic to the initiated than any beach party on a Friday night. Let's go through our check-list now: at the end of the main village road there's a parked truck , equipped with the usual industrial-strength hi-fi system and speakers generating enough bass to rumble the food in your stomach at a distance of forty yards, and... yes... right in front the truck are the expected couples wukkin' up and poochin' back to the standard Pan-Caribbean musical diet consisting of a generous helping of calypso, a side-order of reggae, a dash of French West Indian zouk, all marinated in a sizzling soca sauce. Great stuff for the North American and European palefaces, but we Trinis, Bajans, Vincies and Guyanese could almost sing the stuff note for note while asleep. After all, we are the children of El Dorado, the natives of winter-free paradise, the place those sixteenth century Spaniards were looking for. We know the routine. Smile at them as they alight from the nearest Jumbo and pass through Customs, take their bags and escort them up to their freshly laundered air-conditioned hotel suites, indulge them as they make a few hesitant yet enthusiastic gyrations to our Caribbean groove, encourage them to spend a dollar or two or more but don't be too obvious about it. Crass materialism is ok for the first world, but they don't want to see the same in us, it sorta tarnishes the island boy image. Hey, just look at the

Calabash

guy and gal over there, white tourist chick and indigenous ebony black beach god, yep, we do know the routine. My wife and I, for jaded curiosity's sake, take up our positions and dance in close proximity, so as to eavesdrop and hear what lines the locals use in this place, to see if they are any different to those we hear back home. The beach god is dancing with her, teaching her the moves, guiding her hips and she blushes as she learns. He is apparently a handy teacher, she gets the hang of it in quick time. My wife and I wait for the kill. Will he lean across with oily eyes and whisper something salacious in her ear? This particular song is coming to an end, so he'd better make it quick... but he lets the song end, thanks her for the dance, and with mock formality hands her back to her boyfriend who was dancing not too far away all the while. Oh dear, Vicki and I think, the deer got away, better luck next time... hold on, wait a sec, the beach god turns, makes a gesture and a buxom lass dances up to him and the two of them proceed to show the other couple how two experts can really put down a good 'wine'. Vicki looks at me all perplexed and I stroke my chin, not quite getting it.

Not accepting that all the beach god wanted was to teach a girl how to wuk up properly
Not accepting that ulterior motives seemed to be lacking here
Not accepting that the guy probably wasn't a beach god at all
Just somebody out with his girl having a good time
And just wanting to spread the good times around

In disbelief, I look around, at other couples, looking to find what I'm accustomed to, familiar with. I do find at least two beach gods going through their paces, but the overwhelming majority are just whites, blacks, browns, French, Lucians, humans, all dancing, talking, drinking and generally liming with little thought to ulterior motives. Friday night seems too short for ulterior motives, the chicken and lambi sizzling on the grill won't permit it and the cold beers swimming in the ice buckets need to be drunk *now*. And the big truck at the end of the road with those massive belly-rumbling speakers constantly pummels and yet massages your consciousness until you are... not quite in your old skin anymore: the bills, bitchy bosses, bad grades, botch-ups, and silly bickering is all blasted out of you, out into the warm night, a night tight and passionate with wukkin' up. Anxieties aren't welcome here. They can wait, 'til after the music, after tonight. Tell you what, psycho-analyse it later. Give me a beer and a hot piece of fowl. I'll be what I was when the speakers shut off, some time away, far from here, far from now, far from Friday night at Gros Islet.

