

CALLOWAY & the AMERICAN DREAM

from the fictional desk of
Ned Mudd

There's only two kinds of people in this world: Human beings and soulless bastards. Unfortunately I'm surrounded by the second variety most of the time, which is why I set out on an adventure – to get as far away as possible from vampires, talking heads, wonks, and hired thugs. Funny, but it's the soulless bastards who yell the loudest about how close they are to Jesus.

Seeing how my old truck wasn't up to the challenge of a long road trip, I had Elroy go over it with a comb, changing parts that were busted, adding oil and a can of Super Lube to the crankcase. Two new tires went on at the last minute – it never pays to have a blowout in the middle of a good trip.

For extra measure, I buffed the truck's silver eagle hood ornament, making it shine hard. That ornament was hell to attach to the hood and since it was going to be leading the way for awhile, I figured it might as well look snappy.

Most folks don't travel with a cat. That's for a reason: cats don't usually appreciate cars much and tend to make lousy companions on the road. But Calloway was an exception to the rule and wasn't about to be boarded at some stinking Vet's clinic. So we set off one stormy evening, searching for anything approximating the real American Dream but not banking on finding much. It's always better to be a tad pessimistic in the early stages of any adventure. That way, when things turn sideways, which they will, the chances of being pleasantly surprised increase.

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I often ask myself: Why is everyone I know hell bent on having babies? Nothing against the blind rages of carnal knowledge, but the obsession with reproduction has become a known disease among the youth of today.

That was one of the reasons I left the old homestead when I did – to get past seeing old acquaintances strolling the Village with their tow-headed babies, sometimes two to a stroller. I would stop and say hello, but all the while I was thinking: What drives a poor girl to this condition? Doesn't she know her youth has been sacrificed to the preventable urges of automatic and irrelevant strings of DNA?

But on the night we left, there were no babies in sight. They were all at home in the suburbs being washed by tender hands, preparing for another dreamless night in a safe and comfortable crib. Outside, the sky was almost green, a line of bad thunder storms moving into our area. I saw a flash of lightning split the sky in three directions, high over the city. I thought: If we could only harness that shit!

Calloway seemed excited that we were on the way somewhere. He paced across the seat, going back and forth with that built-in gyroscope of his. No matter how bumpy the road got, he could stand on the front seat and not lose balance. That's something no human could do.

Because of the weather, we had the windshield wipers on high speed. It didn't take long to figure out that Elroy forgot to replace those things during the big tune up. They were about dry rotted and left slimy trails of water all across the windshield with each pass. The only way to keep rolling and remain safe was to concentrate on the striped line down the middle of the road.

Pretty soon Calloway got tired and settled down to a snooze in my lap. We had the radio tuned to a show about reincarnation and the announcer was just getting ready to tell us the secret of how to realize who you were in the last life when we got out of range and lost the station. So we switched to a show featuring the stars of the Grand Ole Opry and slid down the highway towards a rendezvous with whatever Destiny felt like dishing up.

New Orleans has always been a wild and dangerous place in my mind, so we went in that direction, cutting through Jackson, Mississippi, and into the scrub piney woods that line the bottom half of Dixie. By then the rain started easing up a bit and we made good time thanks to Elroy's tune up and a string of country hits easing out of the radio.

My hood ornament looked proud as we sliced across Lake Ponchartrain and spied the downtown area. If that lake was clean enough to drink, I figure every man, woman, and child in America could take a slug of that water and not lower the lake one inch. It's that big. Everybody knows cats despise water and a puddle as big as Lake Ponchartrain must represent living hell to the feline species, Calloway being no exception. He flat out refused to even look out the window as we zoomed across the bridge towards whatever lay in wait.

By the time we pulled up to the corner where Canal meets Bourbon Street, we were both feeling a surge of excitement. The truck found a path into the famous French Quar-

ter and we marveled at the scene outside. There were people everywhere! It seemed like almost everybody on the street was decked out in some sort of costume. I never saw so many wild colored hats, shoes, and t-shirts painted with nasty words.

Calloway stood on the seat, his paws up on the door, wagging his tail as we got deeper into the tick of things. I noticed a long line of fancy posters and blinking signs. It didn't take much to figure out that we were in the belly of the biggest bar district in North America, except for maybe Las Vegas.

By happenstance, I spotted a parking place on the curb and jumped the truck in as best I could. Now that we weren't moving, Calloway started banging his tail real hard. It reminded me of a garden hose that turns crazy when accidentally let loose. All up and down the street were neon signs proclaiming food and drink. To top that off, a few joints had what appeared to be naked ladies standing in the doorway, beckoning hungry souls into their dens of iniquity. As far as the American Dream was concerned, things were looking up!

I picked a likely place to get us a bite to eat and a beer and told Calloway, "Now listen here: I'm going in that place over yonder to see what I can rustle up and you just lie here and behave. I'll be back in a bit and we're gonna fill up on Creole vittles like you've never imagined." Then I rolled his window down some so he'd get plenty of fresh air. I didn't reckon he'd have any inclination to jump out, seeing as the streets were packed full of assorted freaks and second-rate tourists.



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Calloway purred for a second, flinging his tail militantly. I started to walk away, then looked back for the hell of it. There was Calloway with his feet up on the window, his face stuck against the glass. He wasn't much at guarding the truck, but he had a good personality.

I felt pretty good about things as I made a bee line for the Rubber Zipper.

They say that music is the soul of New Orleans, but I don't know. Looking up and down Bourbon Street, it seemed like beer and sex might be the real story. The first thing I saw when I got flush with the door of the Zipper was a big glassed-in poster announcing the venue's entertainment. According to the sign, they had the best retinue of bare-breasted dancers in Louisiana.

"Step right on in young man," a character squawked from just inside the door. It was dark in there and discerning his face was a trick. A curl of cigarette smoke followed his words onto the sidewalk.

"How much?" I said, shielding my eyes, trying to adjust them to the light.

"You eighteen?" he wheezed.

"Older'n that," I said with a grin. Funny how the young feel proud of being older than they are. They don't know that time is a freight train.

The dim man's hand reached out and a scrawny finger told me to enter. "It don't cost nothing to get in, boy. Five dollar minimum on drinks."

As I passed him, I smelled a week's worth of whiskey on his stale breath.

"Cost anything to get out?" I joked.

"That depends on you," he said through dull yellow teeth.

There's something about being in a room full of naked women that does a man good. Maybe it goes back to the cave times, or it could just be the call of nature. But I could feel it as soon as I entered the Zipper.

Here's what the joint looked like: Inside the door was a swinging platform hanging in the air. A big-butted lady was lying on the thing as it moved like a pendulum back and forth. You couldn't see much of the lady, except for her reflection in a dirty mirror up on the ceiling. Mainly all that was visible was her watermelon sized buns.

Past the flying lady and along one wall ran a curved bar with a dozen stools. A bartender stood duty and seemed particularly interested in polishing glasses. I never noticed him as much as wink at one of the ladies of the House. Maybe he was terminally bored with skin. Too much of a good thing.

The other side of the room hosted a funny shaped elevated stage. I never saw so many speakers before; and the mirrors! There was a mirror for every direction and angle. I couldn't figure out why folks like me would pay to sip beer and look at themselves in a mirror. Later I learned the truth: Girls like to watch their posture while dancing nude. It's a fact.

What really got me was the way a few tables sported their own naked girl. It was a serious feat to dance atop a table and not spill the drinks. But there they were, gyrating for all the world to see.

If I was out to snag a chunk of the American Dream, this was the right place.

I slid into a seat at the edge of the stage right when an invisible voice barked over the intercom, "And now, ladies and gentlemen – all the way from Bogalusa.... The lady with an attitude.... Sabrina and her famous dancing snake!"

I looked around to see what "ladies" he was talking about but there weren't any to

speak of, just an old hag back near the bar. Plus, I never did find where that voice came from. The Rubber Zipper was a high-tech place.

Just then a loud BOOM came over the speakers and a leg appeared from behind a tattered red curtain. The leg ended in a high heeled shoe, the kind that pokes a girl's butt out when she walks. The shoe wagged back and forth to a weird song. Then, with no warning, I saw the head of what looked like a python come crawling down the leg, like it was born to travel on human skin. The snake's tongue flickered like you see on TV. The tongue was forked and a soft shade of pink.

Boom, boom, boom, went the music. Slide down the leg, went the snake. Clap, clap, clap, went the guys sitting around me. So I joined in, using one hand to slap the edge of the stage. Isn't there some story about the sound of one hand clapping?

About that time a girl wearing nothing but an apron came over and told me I had to buy a drink. When she got back I found out what a five dollar draft beer looks like. Not much. But at that moment I was more focused on seeing the rest of Sabrina than worrying about Bourbon Street economics.

Looking back on it, I can't recall much about Sabrina's dancing expertise. Maybe my memory is clouded by the sheer number of nipples I saw that night. What I do remember is that her snake was about as lively as a dead battery. I could see why, too: The thing had a bulge about half way down its body. Probably a lab rat or something like that. Anyway, snakes don't feel much like dancing when they've just stuffed themselves.

I tossed a dollar at the snake and saw Sabrina snatch it up with her crotch. That was a trick I never saw before! Then things get blurry, like a dream you have that seems like reality when you first wake up, but turns cloudy about five minutes later.

What I do recall goes like this: A fat dancer came out in a New Orleans Saints helmet and was swinging a pair of jugs that were made to look like footballs. A guy next to me wanted to play with them and made a loud whooping noise when she swung her nipples in a circle in time to the music. I think he was shouting the name of football plays, because every now and then he would holler "Hut! Hut!"

That dancer either smiled or grimaced at him through her shiny white teeth. But the guy's shenanigans must've been contagious, because I heard myself yelling the same thing. As the action got going, the guy calling the plays ordered a drink and had the waitress bring me one, too. I thought that was mighty neighborly and toasted him when the suds arrived.

"Thanks, brother!" I shouted over the disco music.

"Draw play off left guard," he shouted back. As everybody knows, that was a famous play that Bear Bryant liked to run. Beat the snot out of Auburn with it during a particularly onerous Iron Bowl game.

"Right on!" I agreed and sloshed the entire beer down in one clumsy gulp.

What I didn't figure was that the guy actually intended to execute the play right then and there. I guess he figured we were in a third and long situation and had called the draw play for real. Of course, nobody but him knew this at the time.

Boom, boom, boom, went the drums as the Saints lady swayed to and fro. Ringlets of ebony hair had escaped from under her helmet, and were doing a dance all their own. She looked like a lumpy version of Salome the Wicked. I wonder what she would have thought if she'd known what was about to happen?

Most folks have heard that voodoo is the backbeat of New Orleans. The story goes that voodoo came to America with slavery, transplanted to New Orleans from Haiti or some other seedy island. According to lore, voodoo is the magnetic rhythm of the French Quarter – it's the snake shaking its tail, the rooster crowing in a new morning, the beat of a bat's wings. People have lost their minds to voodoo. Others have turned up dead, or worse. Many a chicken has sacrificed its neck to the voodoo blade.

Maybe it was voodoo that caused all the trouble there inside the Rubber Zipper. I don't know; but something sure as hell broke loose and set off a chain reaction that might not have ended even yet.

As the lady with the pig-skin tits swirled her body to a worn out Bee Gees number, my new friend, the Joe Namath wanna-be, decided to set the backfield in motion.

"42," he moaned against Barry Gibb's sugary trembling vocals.

"38!" he called, looking around the room, checking every player's position. It wouldn't do to find somebody off sides.

"18 left, 53," he shouted.

I noticed his eyes were dilated way past normal, like maybe he'd been to the optometrist and the drops hadn't worn off. Of course, they say certain recreational chemicals will do that to a pair of eyes; but I wouldn't have first hand knowledge of that.

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who might end up in a topless bar on Bourbon Street
– NEVER do something so strange that
the management shuts the music down.**

Anyway, Broadway Joe chirped along, milking every ounce of pleasure he could out of being on the verge of the Big Play. For all I knew, this was the Super Bowl of his life, his reason for existing. He sure was acting the part.

The girl with the sporty boobs probably couldn't hear the play being called, seeing as how the Bee Gees were blasting at ear-splitting volume. But if she had looked, she might have noticed something weird was going on. All the sudden, Joe stood erect, waving his arms like some huge water fowl that needed to dry its wings in the air. I thought he had been bitten by a bug or something, but then I heard what he was yelling.

"Quiet!" he demanded. "Ref, I can't hear my own call; the home team is blocking my signals!"

Several heads turned in our direction. The two guys closest to us got up and walked away. I wasn't sure who he was yelling at, because there was no referee in the House.

Then an odd thing happened - the music turned off.

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But that's what happened and then it got real quiet, like the way it sounds when a snow storm is just starting. Next thing I knew, that invisible voice came over the speakers: "You – the one with the arms – you're 86'ed," said the voice. "Get outta here and

don't come back. And take your sidekick with you, the one with the baseball cap." That was me he was talking about! What did I do?

Just then Joe sees his opportunity and grabs me by the collar.

"Hut, goddamn it. Hut!" he screamed right in my ear, causing it to go numb. "Hut for Christ's sake!"

Then he turned me towards the stage and -WHUPH! - tossed me in the air like I was a goose feather. For a split second I was seriously airborne. That dude was strong!

Life plays tricks on us from time to time, and that night turned out to be my time. Because as soon as I hit the boards, this blind urge came over me, causing my body to begin acting on its own. My knees came under me, curving my torso into a coiled spring, my head arching up, eyes aligned directly at the darkest crevasse of a sweaty crotch you ever saw.

"Hut!" Joe shouted, his voice sounding like a wounded cow. "Fucking hut!"

Looking back, I suppose it was the beer. Or maybe the honest zeal for a crumb of America. Either way, my brain heard Broadway Joe's immortal words and I sprang forth with a passion usually lacking in my life. Coming out of my crouch, I leaped at the dancer, making contact in the exact spot that Vince Lombardi claimed was a sure bull's eye, right between the numbers, dead center of the most massive cleavage this side of the Kansas City stock yards.

"Eeeeeiiii!" the dancer squealed as we went tumbling to the deck. "Motherfucker!"

Again for reasons unknown, the music suddenly erupted at a dangerously loud frequency.

"Stayin' alive

stayin' alive

stayin' alive," it thundered, sending a chill up my young spine. I never did like the Bee Gees.

Then I felt a powerful kick to my legs, probably the dancer reacting instinctively to being ram-rodged by a confused fullback from off the streets. I would've let her alone, but couldn't seem to figure out exactly how to disengage my body from hers. We were locked.

To make matters worse, a giant fight swung into high gear down below as two burly bouncers decided to break open a few skulls for the fun of it. Nothing like mashing tourists if the opportunity presents itself – bouncer's motto.

So, here I am, in a figure 8 with an ugly girl in a football helmet when out comes Sabrina with her dopey snake and wraps the damned thing around my neck!

"Stayin' aliiiiiiiive...."

Bar fights actually are not much fun except in the rearview mirror. So, when you're in the middle of a raging mass of breaking bones and glass, it's better to retreat gracefully than get smashed for no reason at all. I did the best I could, untangling from Helmet Head and slinking off the stage towards the front door. The fact that I had a large python curled up around my face only added to the bizarre nature of the moment. At one point a big beer mug flew past my nose, spewing me and the snake with suds. Which was a good thing, because the serpent unwound itself and dropped to the floor, disappearing into the debris below.

I dropped to all fours and crawled towards freedom, my hands making nasty sucking sounds as they encountered a strange sticky stuff adhered to the linoleum. Then I was beneath the swinging watermelon butt and almost home. I got to my feet and started to lunge for the truck when something stopped me.

"You fucked up my gig, son!" said the man who had ushered me in to begin with. His whiskey breath had become almost overwhelming.

"Sorry, mister," I mumbled, wiping my palms on my pants. "It wasn't my fault, honest."

The man's eyes resembled little quail eggs as he crinkled his face in a look that I later decided was a blend of disgust and revulsion.

"Let's have a little look-see in your wallet, boy," he said. "You're gonna pay for the damage you done." The guy's suit could've been made out of neon, glowing like fireflies as he turned in the glare of Bourbon Street.

Thinking back, I doubt I would've had the nerve to pop the son-of-a-bitch on any other day, but that's what I did: Hit him right in the jaw and felt his old teeth rattle under my knuckles like a cup of dice.

But that wasn't the end of it. He came right back with uncanny speed and snapped me good under the chin, sending me reeling backwards onto the sidewalk. The force of the punch caused me to reel up against my truck. It crossed my mind that I didn't want to get impaled on my eagle hood ornament.

Most stories in America have nice endings. Mine does, too; but only up to a point. For every gain in life, there's a loss. For every victory, a defeat. Here's how things worked out. You be the judge:

I was up against the truck with this sour-mouthed sleaze-bag breathing down my neck, his right hand waving erratically, looking for a spot to slam some flesh. Things were certainly looking bad at that point when all the sudden, from out of nowhere, came a sound so fearsome as to cause even the manliest man to duck in fear and apprehension: A cat scream.

As I braced for a sucker punch, I saw Calloway land directly on the bar weasel's face and begin scratching to high heaven. It must've hurt something awful because the man spun around, grabbing his face like crazy. But, Calloway wouldn't take "no" for an answer; he was hanging on till the fat lady sang.

"Shit!" the man cursed. "Get it off! Get it off!"

Calloway's claws were dug in good, causing blood to spurt onto the sidewalk. I heard a man calling for the police.

Just then a fat bouncer emerged from the Rubber Zipper, reached out and tore Calloway loose. In the blink of an eye, I saw Calloway's body fly across the street and hit a passing car with a thud.

That was the end of Calloway. He was fresh out of lives.

After the police unscrambled things, I got let go without seeing the inside of the New Orleans jail. I was glad about that; but the fact that my old friend had sacrificed his life trying to save my hide was eating at me like a boll weevil.

I drove out past the swamps, turning north towards Jackson. When I saw a sign for the Desoto National Forest, I pulled in and found a nice dry spot to leave Calloway in.

He's there now, resting in Eternal peace, with his very own chunk of the American Dream.