

Birthday Blues

by
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Calvin Aintree was a miserable man. Not about anything in particular you understand, that was just his disposition. He just couldn't see the nicer side of life. He hadn't always been like that. At least that's what his wife or should I say ex wife, used to say before she married David Constance who whisked her away to a far sunnier existence in Antigua. Apparently Calvin used to be a real laugh and it had been his sense of humour that had attracted her. Of course hard to see that now. Hard to see anyone being genuinely attracted to Calvin Aintree at all.

He was a tall man and could have been broad shouldered but he stood in an unfortunate manner that made his shoulders slope down and his back hunch over. His clothes were rarely ironed and never colourful. He lived in a block of flats where all the children used to call him Angry Aintree behind his back and occasionally to his face. He didn't care. What was there to smile about anyway, he would grumble. He was okay on his own. Just fine.

But the day he turned fifty was to change everything. He had planned nothing. Was going to do what he always did – go to work, make his dinner, have a bottle of beer and watch tv. He hadn't banked on the attention he was going to receive from all and sundry. First thing in the morning before he'd even got dressed, the phone rang. He was still half-asleep so he answered it without thinking.

'Hello? Calvin?' came the voice of an older woman on the phone.

'Yes.' he said flatly stating the obvious and getting grumpy already.

'It's me. Auntie Lunar. Happy birthday son!'

Auntie Lunar was his dad's only sister and he had apparently got on well with her when they'd visited St Lucia. But that was years ago and Calvin really wasn't very into family.

'We've got a little message for you,' she shouted down the phone in her high pitched voice.

'We?' growled Calvin, 'who's we?'

Lunar laughed, 'well now, let me see. There's Uncle Frederick and the twins. There's Janice Boyd, your dad's first love and her three grandchildren, Julius, Miles and Phyllis-Rose. There's Great Aunt Mabel and Gregory Wiseman. You ready?' she asked as the phone shuffled amongst hands down the line in St Lucia.

'What d'you mean ready? For what? What do you want?' he shouted to no one in particular.

But before they could hear his sour temper they began to sing,

'Happy birthday to you,
happy birthday to you,
happy birthday dear Calvin,
happy birthday to you....
.....and many more.'

There was a rush of applause and the sound of spontaneous good wishes and Calvin

spoke for a brief while more before putting the phone down. He didn't quite know how to react. Outwardly he was irritated, inwardly he was quite touched.

As Calvin left his flat for work that morning, nothing was different. He was just that little bit older. He locked the door behind him, took the lift down to the ground floor and stepped out. On the ground level were a group of the local kids, about eight of them. They must have been around nine or ten years old. They stood opposite the lift in a huddle that parted as soon as Calvin appeared. They had been waiting for him. In the past these same kids had pelted him with water balloons and shouted rude things at him and run off. Calvin was ready for their misbehaviour. He flexed his hand in his pocket preparing it for a quick reflex to grab the nearest scallywag. They stood opposite each other for a few moments in a brief truce. Then one of the kids, Marvin, the smallest, was pushed forward into the middle ground. 'Go on, do it', whispered his friends. Calvin waited.

Marvin dug his hands deep into his pockets and kicked the ground self consciously then opened his mouth and sang,

'You ain't nothing but a hound dog, rocking all the while,
you ain't never seen a rabbit so you ain't no friend of mine.'

He did a nine years olds impression of Elvis Presley that brought an internal grin to Calvin's mouth but outside he looked at stern as ever. Marvin was finished and ran back to his friends all looking very excited and pleased with them selves. They ran off shouting 'Happy Birthday Angry Aintree!' and they were gone.

Calvin arrived at work. He spoke to no one - he didn't need to. He sat at his desk in the newly refurbished open plan office and ploughed through the endless correspondence of the day. It was at quarter to four in the afternoon that Chelsea, the receptionist, a silly little girl with no substance to her, irritatingly interrupted Calvin. 'Excuse me Mr Aintree but there's someone to see you at reception.'

'I have no appointments today,' growled Calvin.

'They need to see you,' she said, 'sorry', she whispered as if it were her fault.

'Tell them to come through then,' he said begrudgingly.'

'They insist that you have to come round to the front desk,' said Chelsea looking as if she might cry.

Calvin grumbled and moaned all the way to the front desk. He was a busy man and this kind of blatant disregard for appointment etiquette was just plain rude. As soon as he got to the desk though his manner changed. A very sober looking policeman stood behind the desk waiting for him.

'Calvin Aintree?' he asked in an extremely authoritative voice.

'Yes?' answered Calvin a little concerned.

Suddenly the policeman took off his helmet and burst into song,

'When the red, red robin comes bob-bob-bobbin along,
there'll be no more sobbin when he starts sobbin his old sweet song.'

Calvin was quite taken aback. Shocked at this bizarre behaviour. But he heard chuckles behind him and looked around and saw all his colleagues standing and watching the spectacle with big grins on their faces. As the singing policeman

finished his song to a huge round of applause, Chelsea re-emerged with a big bottle of champagne and a card saying 'Happy Birthday Mr Aintree.'

Calvin didn't know which way to look. He tried to smile but could only look at the ground in embarrassment as several of his colleagues patted him on the back or shook his hand.

On the way home from work Calvin was feeling decidedly different. The bus didn't look as grimy as he normally thought it did. The people didn't look as stupid as he usually thought. The man in the corner shop was quite pleasant when he went to buy his paper that evening. Has it all been in his head? He'd spent so long battling against life and it's troubles that he suddenly had a glimpse of the possibility that he didn't have to fight quite so hard. He walked home slowly. It was getting darker and the moon was rising up in the sky. It was full and bright. Some of the kids still hanging around at the lifts saw him coming and called a hello and tipped their imaginary top hats to him. Calvin tipped his imaginary hat back at them and gave them something of a smile. In all the time these kids had known old Angry Aintree he'd never had a kind look or word for any of them and here he was playing along with their games. They watched in silence as the lift arrived and Calvin got in. Their stunned looks actually made him chuckle once he was inside the lift.

He cooked his dinner, opened his beer and found his way onto the small balcony at the back of his flat. He felt a little lighter, so many people had been so nice to him today. He caught sight of the moon again. It was shining brightly, lighting a path on the ground for someone to follow. Calvin looked up at it and without thinking started to sing to himself,

'Blue moon, you saw me standing alone,
without a love of my own,
without a dream in my heart.'

A woman's voice interrupted his thoughts and said, 'Now that's too bad.' Calvin looked up and on the balcony next to him was Marcia, twice married, seven kids, now old enough to be on her own, early fifties she looked and not bad thought Calvin. 'I hear it's your birthday Mr Aintree,' she offered, 'I have some cake and some chilled Guinness punch. Would you give me the pleasure of celebrating the turning of a year with you?' She had heard him singing. Calvin's grumbly voice started off in his head, how rubbish he must have sounded, how privacy is so hard to find. But then he looked at her offering him such a nice end to such a nice day and he smiled a big smile and nodded. 'I do believe that Angry Aintree may be mellowing,' she said smiling, 'come on in.' She left the balcony. Calvin chuckled to himself, 'who would have thought,' he said to himself, 'maybe life does begins at fifty.'