

# THE REPUTATION OF **BOOYA CARTHY**



PHILLIP DROWN

# The Reputation of Booya Carthy

Phillip Drown

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# chapter one

## 1

*Summer*

1927

Pear juice dribbled from the boy's chin. The butterfly he was following landed on a branch, perched as still as a leaf; black-striped orange wings given away by the empty sky. The boy inched forward on his knees and twisted a plum from a low branch. Not carefully enough. The butterfly returned to flight.

Biting into the plum, the boy followed the butterfly out of the orchard, towards a high hedge. He stopped. There was a woman's voice, somewhere singing. The boy put his hand on the gate and peered over it. Looking around, seeing no one, he lifted the latch.

The song drew him along a path parallel to the lawn; with each step, a crunch of gravel beneath his bare feet. He stayed close to the hedge, running his hand along its trimmed edge, as if he might vanish into its depth if he were seen. Ahead, the

house stood over the garden. Like a magpie drawn to a pie cooling on a window ledge, the voice called him closer.

His foot touched the bottom of the steps leading to the house. He crept to the top, faced by an open door. Without stopping to think, the boy stepped into the dark hallway.

It was much cooler inside. Drops of sweat chilled on his forehead. He slid past a sideboard, his hand on its surface leaving a sticky trail. It flopped from the end of the sideboard, gently against his thigh. A grandfather clock ticked above him, loud, to the rhythm of his beating heart. He caught his wide eyes looking into a long mirror on the opposite wall. His reflection didn't seem excited to be so close to the beautiful voice.

A heavy door was before him. He placed his hand against the grain. The sound battered at the wood. The boy took hold of the handle. He looked along the dark corridor towards the depths of the house, and then over his shoulder to the whispering light of day. And the beautiful voice continued to call him. Gripping with both hands, the handle started to turn.

## 2

Everything in the room was golden. Golden candlesticks with golden candles. Golden lamp stands beneath golden shades. The frame of the mirror and the wallpaper. Beside a built but unlit fire, even the coal scuttle and utensils were golden.

Gold flickered in the boy's eyes.

Inside the golden picture frames were paintings: horses rearing on their hind legs, fearsome men upon them pointing swords to the sky; men in battle with terror on their faces, others with deadly intent in their frozen cries. Above the fireplace hung a portrait of a man with a neat line of moustache above his thin top lip. Another portrait showed a round-faced

woman staring out from above her high collar. Standing on a low bookcase were animals carved from wood, their mouths full of teeth wide in a silent roar. In every otherwise-empty space were carvings and statues, all captured in a moment of horror or of calm.

And the golden voice continued to sing.

It was a surprise that there were not a dozen people gathered there, playing horns and trumpets and drums. Stranger still, there was no lady, only empty chairs and sofas, and the objects that glowed like the sun.

The boy noticed an upturned horn by the window, as golden as anything in the room. With his palms pressed flat against the wall behind him, he began to side-step towards it.

The golden horn was so huge, it was a wonder that it didn't topple forward, taking with it the polished box beneath it. The noise was deafening, thudding deep inside the boy's head and chest. He placed his fingers on the rim of the table and eased onto the tips of his toes. A flat disc was rotating on top of the box. He watched it spin, a needle skimming over its surface. The arm was shaped at the end like a claw and the needle sticking out of it was golden.

In a blare of every instrument that had ever been blown, strummed, plucked or bashed, the sound suddenly stopped. The only noise left was the gentle whirr of the disc moving, the claw-needle running, and a faint, crackly noise beneath it.

A new sound startled the boy; papers being shuffled and shaken. Hidden behind a desk and a newspaper, a man was in the room with him. The boy could not move to hide. He could not let loose his one-handed grip on the table. He could not move at all, as frozen as the statues.

The man folded the paper and placed it on the desk. He began to lift himself from the seat. The breath stopped in his nostrils.



He was looking directly at the boy.

The line of moustache rose and his thin lips parted.

‘Young master, good morning. I was not aware that I had company.’

The man stepped from behind the desk and clasped his hands behind his back. Silence filled the space between them, and the gentle scratch of the needle.

‘I find myself lost to the world when listening to opera, I’m afraid. I forget how loud it must be to everyone else. Ha! *A racket*, my wife calls it. Drives her potty. Not that she isn’t as charmed by opera as I am, but she prefers for it to be played at a more . . . *moderate* volume. More *piano*.’

The man positioned himself on the edge of the desk and he cupped his hands.

The boy’s fingers slipped from the polished tabletop and he dropped to his feet.

‘Whoopsie.’

The man’s gaze stayed on the boy, with nothing more than a blink shared.

‘It was Puccini’s *Tosca* that I was shamelessly blasting out. The first ever recording of it, in fact, with Valentina Bartolomasi as Floria. I have to say, it isn’t my most preferred opera. Ghastly story, too. A story that contains it all: jealousy, vanity, deceit . . . Frankly, young master, not a story for young ears.’

The man crossed his legs and reset his hands.

The boy had still not moved.

‘I knew Ms. Bartolomasi. In fact, that is a dreadful exaggeration. I did not know her so much as I made her acquaintance. I only met her twice. One time was in Covent Garden – which is back home in London, as you know – and the other when my wife and I were fortunate enough to visit La Scala, the opera house in Milan, perhaps the finest in the world, by way of an invitation from an erstwhile client of mine—’

The man clapped his hands together and the boy flinched.

'I'm rambling. I doubt any of this is of interest to you. But if it is . . .'

Standing, the man began to move across the room.

'The cabinet beside you, with the gramophone perched on top, is full of recorded music.'

The boy's unblinking eyes grew as the man approached. He stepped back, bumped against the wall, and he continued trying to step back further.

'You needn't be afraid, young master. I'm inviting you to look. See?'

The man opened the doors of the cabinet. Inside, it was packed with black discs in thick card sleeves.

'Opera, mostly. Gifts, more than not. Not the collection I would have necessarily chosen for myself, but one mustn't turn down good fortune.'

The man ran his finger along the sleeves. Curiosity peeled the boy from the wall.

'I know what might interest you!'

The man caught the boy off guard. Startled like an animal to thunder, he bumped back against the wall.

'Since being in your country, I've come to fancy one of the local musical fashions. *The country blues*, they call it. It has a marvellously energetic rhythm. Have you heard the country blues?'

The man allowed a moment for the boy to answer. He was answered with only a momentary twitch of a frown.

'No? Well, it's played roundabouts. But there is something quite special in hearing it played through the gramophone.'

With a half-step towards the open cabinet, the boy leaned forward, trying to see what the man was looking for.

'I know it was here somewhere . . . No. Not that one. I was sure . . . Not that either, blasted thing – I must palm that off on



someone I'm not so fond of, *ha-ha*, cruel and ungrateful man that I am— Ah! Here you are, you devil.'

Waving the disc in its sleeve, the movement shocked the boy back to the wall. Consumed by triumph, the man didn't notice. He lifted the paw with its needle-claw, stood *Tosca* against the cabinet, and placed the disc on the gramophone.

The man watched it whirr. The boy watched the man.

'Please, young master' – the man wagged a hand behind him – 'please do take a seat. One must be completely— Here it comes. The country blues! I didn't tell you the name of the performer. He's called Blind Lemon Jeff—'

A tap on the door.

'Mister Henry?'

A lady eased open the door and entered.

'Is everything fine? I saw the door was—'

The lady's mouth opened wide and wider. She covered it with a hand.

The boy pressed his palms out to each side, as if he might be swallowed by the golden wallpaper.

'Calvin Carthy, what do you think you're doing in Mister Henry's room?' The lady faced the man. 'Mister Henry, I'm so sorry. I can't understand this behaviour.'

She snapped her fingers and pointed to the floor at her feet. 'You get here now, Calvin Carthy. Have you lost your *mind*? What do you think you're doing?'

Mister Henry arched his eyebrows. And the country blues continued to play.

'You owe me an answer, Calvin Carthy.'

'I heard the music he was playing,' the boy said, pointing at Mister Henry. 'I wanted to see.'

'You call Mister Henry Mister Henry, not *he*.' She turned to Mister Henry. 'I'm so sorry for my son. I don't know what's gotten into him. But he won't be doing it again, I can assure

you that,' she said, smiling at the man and scowling at the boy.

'My dear Adeline, it is of no ail to me. It was my error, if anyone's, playing my music so loud. I did rather invite young Calvin in. There's no need to be hard on the boy. He's been incredibly polite. Rather, he's a credit to you.'

'Well . . . you're kind to say that, Mister Henry.'

'Not at all,' said Mister Henry, moving towards his desk. 'I rather hope that young Calvin would indulge me by allowing me to share more of my collection with him sometime. After all, there's no point in owning anything if not to share it with others.'

'What's *he* doing in here?'

Next to Adeline, having silently entered, had appeared a blond-haired boy. He was pointing at Calvin – who was yet to unstick himself from the wall.

'George. You aren't to speak like that.'

'But, daddy,' George said, stamping his foot, 'he shouldn't be *in* here. He's not allowed.'

'Don't you yell back at me, young man. It's my house and I decide who comes and goes. Young Calvin is my guest.'

'He won't bother you no more,' said Adeline. 'Come with me, Cal. You see the trouble you caused?'

Calvin looked up at Mister Henry, who nodded.

'I was taught to always do as my mother says. It's a fine virtue, and you'll do well to abide by it always.'

Calvin moved towards Adeline. Her scowl had softened, even if that of the blond boy beside her had not.

Heading into the dark hallway, with his mother's hand on his shoulder guiding him, beneath the sound of George being reprimanded, Calvin could still hear the sound of the country blues.

In a far corner on the grounds of the Wilmington mansion, Calvin Carthy rose with the sun. He pulled on his shirt and pants – the shirt too tight and the pants too short. The day was battering at the door to be let in. Calvin rushed outside to meet it.

On the breeze was the scent of bacon and sausage. Most days Mamou came with a plate, or he went to the kitchen in the big house. Mamou had told him many times he wasn't to help himself to Mister Henry's fruit straight from the branch, without asking first or being invited. That's what she *said*. But Calvin couldn't see how anyone would notice if pieces of fruit were missing, or why Mister Henry might miss a few from so many. If the dragonflies were counting, let them tell.

Taking his first bite of an apple, Calvin was still thinking about Mister Henry's music. *The country blues*. It wasn't loud like the opera – as Mister Henry called it – but sounded like it was trapped inside the golden horn. Not trying to escape but accepting; singing of what it was like in there, all echoey.

The horses were trotting around the paddock. Their heads lifted and waved as they brushed flies aside. Sometimes, if he had a bite of apple or pear left over – and if there was no one else around – Calvin would call a horse over and feed it the core.

He leaned on the fence and a horse went to him then. She allowed Calvin to stroke her snout; a gentle nod of thanks for the last bite of apple.

'I love you, Lady,' he said, running his hand over the thick hair. 'Your place on Earth is as important as you believe in your heart.'

Lady slowly closed and opened her long eyelashes.

'We all breathe air the same, you know.'

‘That horse doesn’t understand what you’re saying, silly,’ said George, standing on the grass behind Calvin. ‘They’re stupid and dumb, like you. *And* I saw you feed it that piece of fruit. If they need to be fed then I shall feed them. Or get your father to do so.’

The two boys were facing each other. The same age and same height, but equally as different as two boys could be.

George tilted his head, his eyes narrow. ‘You don’t speak much, do you?’

‘I only say things after I’ve thought about what to say and whether it can do any good to say it.’

‘Good. Anyway, I’ve not come all the way out here to talk about horses.’

Turning his back on Calvin, George began to walk away.

He stopped, clicked his fingers and pointed at the ground beside him. ‘Come on then, step to heel. Father wants me to show something to you.’

‘Mister Henry?’

‘Such impertinence,’ George muttered, his nose pointing to the sky. His hands were linked behind his back. Still facing away, he glanced to the side, half of his profile in view. ‘My *father* has instructed me to come out here and show you something. Something that, for some reason, he thinks might be of interest to you. So, if you will . . .’

‘What is it, George?’

‘For goodness’ sake,’ George said, his hands flailing, now turning. ‘I have been instructed to *show* you, Calvin. To *show* you. I’m a busy man, so I’ll thank you not to loiter.’

Running to catch up, Calvin followed George towards a secluded part of Mister Henry’s land, further away from the paddocks and the house.

‘What is it, George?’

The boys were looking at a shed. Nailed vertically to the back of the shed was a stretch of baling wire, wound tight. At the bottom, a piece of wood with a tin can attached had been wedged beneath the wire, tautening it. The completed piece looked no more than a stretch of baling of wire nailed to a shed.

‘Please, George,’ Calvin repeated, ‘what is it?’

‘It’s a diddly-bow,’ George replied, hands on hips. ‘That’s what father said. It’s a kind of instrument. For some reason he thought it might interest you.’

George shrugged his shoulders and mumbled something. After a moment, he went to the diddly-bow and ran his finger down the wire.

‘Did you know that Africans used to make instruments out of human bones?’

Calvin shook his head.

‘They did, you know, the Africans. They would use bones to beat on skulls, like drums’ – he slammed his hand against the side of the shed – ‘They made rattles out of rib cages, and they’d tie strings, like this’ – he plucked the wire – ‘along the spine, and play it like a guitar.’

‘Mostly it was explorers they used to make instruments from. They cut them open while they were still alive, ripped out their guts and showed them their beating heart.’ George demonstrated each slice and surgery as he spoke, his teeth peeled back to the gums. ‘And then they put the explorer, his heart still beating, in a big cauldron of boiling water until the meat fell off the bone. And after that, they would *eat* the meat and make instruments out of the bones.’

George checked to see if Calvin was paying attention.

With his nose wrinkling and his neck shrinking, he was.

'But it wasn't only the explorers and people who got lost in the jungle that ended up in the pot . . . No, they sometimes ate each other, and rivals from other tribes.'

'They ate their own people?'

'That's right. Cannibalism, it's called. They ate every last bit. Even their *eyeballs*.'

George stopped running his finger along the wire. He was staring at Calvin: fingers half-curved, struggling to swallow down his revulsion.

'You don't suppose that you're African, do you?'

'No, George,' Calvin replied, shaking his head. 'I'm from here. You know I am.'

'You look the same as African people.'

'Paw said that we're, uh, ascendants from African. But not *real* African.'

'Well, have you ever eaten a person before? That's the way to tell.'

'No, George, no,' Calvin said through cupped fingers. He lowered his chin to his chest and faced away. 'I don't want to play anymore. I—'

*Tuh-dwwaaang*

Calvin released his face from his hands.

George laughed. He twanged the wire again. Again and again, more rapidly, stamping his foot each time.

*Tuh-dwwaaang; dwwaaang; dwwaaang*

Calvin's head nodded with each twang. He was helpless not to anticipate the next one. So George beat a more irregular pattern.

*Dwwaaaaang . . . Tuh-dwwaaa-dwwaaa-dwwaaaang*

Calvin's head was ready to nod, his hands poised like a conductor. But George stopped. Calvin watched him, waiting for a signal that he was about to pull the wire again.



'Do you like the toy that my father gave me?'

Calvin nodded. 'I do, George.'

'You'll like this then.'

George fumbled in the long grass growing up the back of the shed.

'George?'

'What is it now?' George replied, rummaging in the grass.

'Have you ever heard your daddy's music?'

'Of course I have. I hear it all the time. I do live in the same house, remember.'

'Have you ever heard Blind Lemon Jeff?'

'Who? Oh, probably.'

George pulled himself upright. 'Here it is.'

In his hand was a glass bottle with clods of mud and strands of dead grass attached to it.

'This is how you *really* play with the diddly-bow.'

George wiped the bottle on the grass, removing as much of the mud as he could manage. He plugged the bottle with one of his fingers and reached as high up the wire as he could.

'Are you ready?'

Calvin nodded.

'Then here we *go*.'

Calvin chuckled beneath his breath, his cheeks tingling.

George twanged the wire, and was answered by the now familiar sound. He held the bottle against the wire and the sound deadened.

'Wait,' he said. 'Just wait.'

With his hands readied by his side, Calvin waited.

George twanged the wire and Calvin chuckled.

'Stop that noise. You're putting me off.'

Calvin swallowed his chuckle and his excitement went to his eyes. They might have popped, looking from George to the diddly-bow.

George twanged the wire. After wiping the bottle on his shorts, he held it against the wire and hurriedly slid the bottle up and down, the dull tone slurring before dying away.

'It's clearly broken,' George said, pulling the bottle from his finger and dropping it to the floor. 'Stupid thing.'

Calvin drummed his fingers on his thighs. 'Uhm. George?'

'What?' George said, glaring at him.

'Can I play?'

'If you wish. But don't say I didn't tell you.'

Calvin picked up the bottle. It was loose on his finger – unlike George, who had filled the hole; the bottle coming off with a *glug* when he removed it. Calvin glanced at George. His arms were folded across his chest, a podgy second chin where his head was sunken into his neck, glaring at Calvin with the same sulky expression as before, a damp blanket over his fury.

'Go on, then. I haven't got all day.'

Calvin twanged the wire, making that wonderful sound. Now that he was closer, he could feel it vibrating through the wooden panel. Resonance poured out of the tin can. The shed swallowed the sound and chewed on it. Even the feel of the wire, fragile as a twig, but with a resistance similar to pulling fruit from a branch.

After twanging the wire a few times – delighted with each *tuh-dwaaaaang* – the bottle weighed heavily on his finger. He twanged the wire and held the bottle against it. The sound muffled, just as before. He quickly slid the bottle along the wire and was answered by a quiet change in tone.

'See?' said George. 'I told you it was broken, stupid thing that it is.'

Calvin barely heard him. He twanged the wire and wiped the bottle on his pants, just as George had done.

*Dwaaaaang*

He twanged again.

*Dwaaaaaang*

As the wire vibrated, this time he held the bottle a wire-width away. Rather than pressing the bottle into the wire, he barely touched it, just allowing the bottle to rest against it, gently, like picking up a bug. The sound of the bottle as it slid along the wire travelled through Calvin's hand, up his arm, coursing through his body and back down into his hand. The shed swallowed the sound and spat it out of the can.

Calvin's body was electrified by the vibrations. He kept playing, and soon found that he could even keep twanging as he slid the bottle, not having to wait and start over. He moved the bottle slowly, imagining what sound would come next, and the diddly-bow purred to his touch.

'Look, George! It ain't broke. It—'

But George had already gone.

[End of free sample]

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