

# “The Song”

by Garvey Hemisphere

Blood covered the chef’s knife as Camille staggered back against the kitchen counter. The knife fell from her hands as crimson drops began to dot the floor. She walked over to the sink and let out a howl as the cold water rained down against her wounds.

“Son of a bitch!” she let out. “I’m so tired of these dull ass knives. I spend more time cleaning up the cuts on my fingers than anything else.”

She kicked the knife with her house shoe in a rage and it went flying across the linoleum before stopping with a clang underneath the fridge. She returned to the counter to see the block of hardened cheese covered in blood on the right side. In another rage, she grabbed the whole hunk of cheese, the bread and meat she had pulled out for a sandwich, and hurled it all into the waste bin. She reached underneath the cabinet, attempting to calm her nerves. She reached in her shirt pocket and to retrieve a cigarette and lit it.

As the smoke filled her lungs, her shoulders began to soften and the muscles in her neck relaxed. She reached underneath the cabinet again to retrieve the peroxide and a small bag of cotton balls to tend to her finger. After fixing her wound and cleaning up the kitchen, she walked over to the telephone and pulled a small white card from her back pocket. She dialed the number on the card and listened to the line till a few times, but there was no answer. After a moment, she heard a loud song that she couldn’t decipher followed by a muffled voice in the background that she assumed was her daughter. After six calls and six voicemails, she still hadn’t been able to make it out exactly.

“Kamryn! This is the last time I’m going to call you. I know you think you’re grown because you’re in college now, but it’s almost 12:30 and my house locks up for the night in exactly thirty minutes. If your hind parts aren’t inside my house, you had better have somewhere else to stay tonight. Don’t try me.”

She slammed the phone down on the receiver and plopped down on the couch. There was fire in her voice, but Camille was more concerned than anything. She took another pull on her cigarette before stamping it out against the glass ashtray beside her root beer and nacho chips on the wooden coffee table. She checked her watch again, before walking back to the phone to make sure she heard a dial tone. She convinced herself that Kamryn had been trying to reach her, but she’d slammed the phone so hard, she’d inadvertently disturbed the dial tone. She reached for the receiver when her father yelled out from upstairs.

“Camille!”

“Oh Lord. What is he doing up?” she said to herself. “I just *knew* I was going to bed in thirty minutes.” She stood up and walked over to the stairwell to hit the light. “Yes Daddy?”

“Come here!” he yelled gruffly.

“Tell me what you need!”

“Come on up here and I’ll tell ya what I need!”

“Daddy, I’m waiting up for Kamryn. Can it wait?”

“No, it cannot wait! If it could wait, don’t you think I woulda waited?”

Camille felt herself growing frustrated again, but held her tongue. “Daddy, can you please just tell me what it is?”

There was no answer, which drew a deep sigh from Camille because it meant he wasn't going to answer any further until she came upstairs. She walked back over to the sitting area to turn off the television and all the lights downstairs before trudging up the stairs. She made her way down the hallway to the room across the hall from hers and made her way inside. She stomped into the room harder than necessary to let him know of her agitation.

"Hey, hey now! Don't you come stompin' 'round here like you ain't got no sense."

"Daddy, I asked you three times what you needed and you didn't say anything."

"Well, maybe I didn't want to yell it."

"That didn't stop you from yelling everything else."

"Well, maybe I didn't want The Girl to know."

"Daddy, I told Kamryn wasn't here yet."

"The Girl ain't here? Where she at?"

"I wish I knew, so I could go on to sleep and stop worrying."

Her father cleared his throat and craned his neck against his pillow. He started a small coughing fit and attempted to clear his throat again. He coughed a final time before speaking again. "The Girl didn't tell you where she was going?"

"Daddy! Can you stop asking me questions and tell me what you need?"

"I need to be changed. *And* rolled over. My hip starting to feel sore on this side."

"What are you even doing up? It's almost one o'clock."

"What I care about what time it is? Where I got to be in the morning?"

"Oh my God, you know I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm just teasing you, Millie. When is The Girl going to be here?"

"She has twelve minutes to walk through that door or she's going to be locked out."

"Hmph. You might as well lock her out now."

"I told her one o'clock."

"Well, she should have picked up that little cellular thing she got. I know you done called her a million times by now. What they call it? A phone mobile?"

"A mobile *phone*, Daddy. And I agree. But unlike her, I'm going to be a woman of my word. I said one o'clock, so I'm giving her that and not one minute more."

"Hmph. You better than me."

"Ain't that the truth?" Camille said with a laugh. Her father rolled his eyes and passed gas to show his displeasure. "Ugh, you just have to make this worse than it needs to be, don't you? Let me go get my gloves and I'll come change you."

She walked to the hallway closet to gather medical gloves, wipes and plastic bags. She turned to head back to her father's room when she heard a key turn in the door's lock and saw Kamryn's shadowy figure attempting to sneak in through the darkness. Camille watched her for a few more seconds as she closed the door carefully, being sure not to make too much noise.

Once Kamryn pivoted and made her way towards the steps sure that she had made it in successfully, Camille snapped on the lights. "KAMRYN ABIGAIL WAYNE! I called you twelve—"

"I know, I know, I know. My phone died and I couldn't find my charger."

"I don't know what you're even talking about. I told you when we were at the store, if you didn't answer that phone when I called, I wasn't going to buy it."

"I just told you—"

“I don’t care what you just said! You’re lucky I’m up dealing with your grandfather or you’d be locked out.”

Kamryn let out a sigh before checking the time on her watch. “It’s only 12:58.”

“I don’t care what time it is! The next time you leave this house and don’t answer that phone, I’m taking it back to the store and it’s going to be me and you. Now, let’s go!”

“Go where?” Kamryn asked with an incredulous look.

Camille pointed towards the top floor. “Upstairs. We’re not done talking!”

“Ma, I don’t want to watch you clean him up. Can’t we just talk to tomorrow? I don’t even know what I—”

“I don’t want you to watch her clean me up either!” he yelled from upstairs.

“Well that’s good to hear, because you’re not watching!” Camille said, tossing her a pair of gloves. “You’re helping!”

“What?” Kamryn asked, looking like she wanted to run back out of the house.

“Next time, pick up that phone. Come on.”

“Ma—”

Camille glared at her and Kamryn that if she kept talking, things would only get worse, so she followed behind silently up to her grandfather’s room. The room smelled rancid and musky, forcing her to gag at the first whiff.

“Oh my God, Ma! You can’t be serious.”

“Kamryn, I’m not going to say it again!”

“But, the smell…”

He let out a laugh and began to choke on the dryness in his throat, but still continued to force laughs at the sight of his granddaughter’s nose turned up in disgust. “Ain’t my fault your mama made them greens so rich!”

“Daddy please,” Camille scowled. “We’re going to clean you up and turn you over, so you can go back to sleep. So *I* can go to sleep.”

“Tell The Girl I’m sorry about the smell.”

“She can hear you, Daddy.”

“Tell The Girl to sing me the song.”

“She’ll sing it once we get you cleaned up.”

Kamryn stood frozen in place, still unsure of exactly what to do.

Sensing her anxiety, Camille moved to the other side and lifted her father’s hip off the bed.

“Come on over here. Just hold his back while I clean him up.”

Kamryn took the smallest steps she could towards the bed and placed her hands on her grandfather’s hip to steady him while her mother removed the diaper and wiped him clean with baby wipes and a cloth. She slid on a new diaper, and together, they put him in fresh pajamas and disposed of the soiled items.

“Did you The Girl I was sorry about the smell?”

“It’s okay, Paw Paw,” Kamryn said with a smile. “I don’t mind it anymore.”

Camille returned her daughter’s smile, before turning her attention to her father. “You need anything else, Daddy?”

“Nah, I’m good now. Just had to get off that hip. I appreciate y’all helping me out, but y’all can make yourselves scarce now. Gon’ try and knock back out for a few hours. What’s for breakfast tomorrow, by the way?”

“Grits, fatback, eggs and sausage,” Camille answered sweetly. “Maybe some wheat toast if you want some.”

“Can you make biscuits instead?” he asked.

“Biscuits? I don’t know, Daddy. That’s a lot of work for a Sunday and we got church tomorrow.”

“I’ll help,” Kamryn chimed in.

“You will not. You’ll sleep in until the very last minute like you do every other Sunday.”

“I’ll get up. I promise. If Granddaddy really wants them.”

“Then, it’s settled,” he said with a large smile. “The Girl will help you make the biscuits. I want strawberry preserves this time though. Not that jelly like you had last time. That processed stuff ain’t good. You need to go on and let Audrey from down the streets make you some of that good peach jam. It’s homemade!”

She gave a sigh as they headed towards the door. “Goodnight Daddy.”

“Oh no, I forgot to sing him the song,” Kamryn whispered as they stepped across the doorway.

She glanced over at her father who had already halfway fallen asleep to dream about Sunday’s fluffy biscuits that awaited him.

“Sing it tomorrow before church,” Camille answered. “I don’t want to get him even more riled up.”

The ladies headed down the hallway and into Camille’s room.

“Now that that’s done, I want to talk about tonight.”

“Do you always do that?” Kamryn interrupted.

“Do what?”

“Clean him up like that? And get him dressed?”

“Don’t try to change the subject, I want to know—!”

“I’m not trying to change the subject,” Kamryn said. “Well I am, but I really do want to know.”

Camille took a seat on her bed. “Well, who do you think does it?”

“I thought that’s what the nurse was for?”

“Kamryn, the nurse leaves at two o’clock every day. Who do you think takes care of your grandfather after that?”

“I guess... I never thought about it.”

“No shit,” Camille said with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry I haven’t helped you more.”

“Oh, stop it. I’ve never *needed* your help. I’ve been taking care of people all my life. I enjoy doing it. I just wanted you to see what it’s like to think about someone besides yourself for once.”

“What do you mean you’ve been taking care of people all your life?”

“When I was a girl, I took care of your Aunt Carol more than anyone else. We couldn’t afford a nurse. Your grandma was... well, you know. And your grandfather was always working. So, I looked after her, made sure she had food, made sure she was cleaned up, had her hair combed. The same things I did for you when you were a girl.”

“And now you’re taking care of Granddaddy. Mama, that’s not right.”

“Girl, what are you talking about?”

Kamryn took a seat next to her mother on the bed. “When are you going to live your own life? You spend your time taking care of everyone except yourself.”

“That’s what you do for family, Kamryn. That’s what family is supposed to do.”

She scoffed. “Well, I’m not doing that. It’s just not fair. You spend your whole life taking care of people and no one is there at the end of the night to take care of you. That’s just not right.”

Camille started chuckling to herself and placed her wig on the nightstand. “You sound just like Janet.”

“Aunt Janet?”

“She hated taking care of Carol. Even though she barely did it. As soon as she turned eighteen, she took off to college and then off to work and off to her own life in Maryland. I can’t even remember the last time we talked on the phone, much less seen one another. It’s like she just up and disappeared.”

“She just went to live her own life, Ma. Something you should be doing. What’s so wrong with that? Aren’t you supposed to leave your family behind when you get married?”

“You ain’t never supposed to leave family behind. You can go away for a little while to do what you got to do. Your brother went off to college and no one is judging him. But when he graduates, he’s coming *back*. That’s what Janet never did. She never came back. You can leave. You can leave if it’s to make a sacrifice for the greater good. But you have to come back. You have to come back to where your family is. Your aunt Janet tries to act like this family doesn’t exist because it’s not what she thinks a family should look like. But you don’t get to pick your family, you only get to pick your friends.”

“So, you give up everything and no one ever gives up anything for you? Is that all life is supposed to be about?”

Camille shook her head. “Girl, let me explain something to you. Your granddaddy took care of us from the time I was born and I wasn’t even his. When Carol was born and they told us she would never be able to walk, Mama started getting depressed and stopped being able to take care of us. She blamed herself and that just made it worse. Daddy worked all day long, came home, cleaned up, made sure we ate and took care of us. During the day, I played games and puzzles with Carol and on the weekends, we had picnics in the backyard. And sometimes, I’d stay home from school when Mom would be gone, and we would read books together. During the days, we were best friends. But at night, Daddy took care of both of us. He gave his entire back taking care of us. And now I’m here to hold his back up for him, because he can’t do it for himself. Because that’s what you do for family.”

“So, who’s going to be here to take care of you when you can’t do for yourself anymore? You’re almost forty and I can’t remember the last time I had any fun.”

“I can. You were seven years old and you broke your foot at your cousin’s birthday party and you couldn’t play outside for the rest of the summer.”

“Oh God, that sucked,” Kamryn said, rolling her eyes. “Wait, that was the last time you had any fun?”

“We played Monopoly and made homemade ice cream and had a picnic lunch in the living room. I had a great time. You didn’t enjoy it?”

“Well at the time, I just wanted to be outside, but looking back on it, I guess it wasn’t so bad. In fact, that’s when you taught me the song for the first time.”

Camille chuckled to herself. “I guess it was. I sang it to make you feel better.”

“And it always did.”

“Your grandfather is the one who taught me that song.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” Kamryn said with a smile. “I have to make sure to sing it tomorrow before church.”

“Yes, you do. Now, head to bed. We’ll talk about you and that phone tomorrow since you decided to volunteer us for biscuit duty.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I love you, baby.”

“Love you too, Ma.”

Kamryn shut the door and walked towards her bedroom. She removed the stack of dollar bills from her pockets and slid them into the shoebox beneath her bed, that was filled to the top with dollar bills. Kamryn placed them into the shoebox carefully and then slid it back beneath her bed.

She removed her clothes and slid into bed before releasing a long sigh.

“It’s good to be home,” she said, before closing her eyes and falling asleep.