

Calla's Song
By Angie Chatman

Calla looked in the bathroom mirror at her son, DJ, who was struggling to zip her dress. He was handsome, like his father, but his eyes were kind and sincere while DeMarcus' had been cold. Calla also saw his frustration, and grief. She wished she could remove both, but there was nothing she could do. She was at stage 4 of pancreatic cancer; there wasn't a stage 5. The disease had taken DJ's childhood; she was not going to allow it to take his music.

"I didn't hear you practice," she said as she applied more makeup to her sallow skin.

"I didn't want to wake you."

"DJ, I love hearing you play, even in my dreams, but if you decide to practice later, make sure your mute box is on."

"Where are you going? You're too sick to be going out."

"I'm going to see Gideon Banks and his band. He's a good friend, remember? We grew up together."

"If he's such a good friend, why haven't you ever mentioned him?" He whined as if he were four instead of 16 with a pimple on his chin.

"I have mentioned him. You probably don't remember," she said. "We were all good friends. Your father and his mother lived on the second floor. Gideon was on the first floor with his parents and older sister, Melanie..."

DJ finished zipping. "I did listen, and I do remember."

"Then what?"

"Why are you going to see him? You're sick, but you're getting dressed up. If he's a just a friend, who I've never met, why bother? You put your pill pack in your purse, so I know you plan on staying awhile." His voice cracked. "Mom, what's going on?"

Calla pushed pass him into the living room. "It's 'whom' I've never met. Where's my coat?"

DJ followed, “Mom, please,” he said wiping his tears on his sleeve. “I know something is up.”

Calla put on her coat, picked up her purse and keys. “I’m going to ask Gideon to be your guardian.”

“Gideon Banks, my guardian? What? His last album was nominated for a Grammy. Mom, what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking about your future. You’ll need a guardian. If I don’t do it, you’ll end up in foster care, and you might end up with someone...” she coughed. “Someone who can’t appreciate your talent.” Calla touched DJ’s chin, avoiding the pimple. “I’ve gotta go. We’ll talk about it later. Don’t stay up too late and don’t forget to wash the dishes.”

Thursday nights at Snookies the shows started earlier than on the weekends – one at 7pm, the other at 9pm. Calla arrived a few minutes before the lock came off the rusted black security grill. Grateful to have found parking, she hoped she could catch Gideon as the combo set up and did their sound check before the first show.

She waited, feet planted on the concrete, back against the brick, to lessen the chance of a fall should the dizziness return. At 6:30p the doors opened. Calla paid the cover fee, found a table, which would be in the shadows once the stage lights were on. Although smoking was no longer allowed, it still smelled like burnt tobacco, menthol, and weed had seeped into the walls like layers of paint. There were a few changes to the décor since she’d last been inside. Then, DJ had been two. Nixon had been re-elected, and the Vietnam War was ending, yet it felt as if the country was still in recovery from the losses of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Calla had finished her degree, obtained her RN license. and regular shifts at the hospital. Her grandmother, Millie, had prattled on about how hard it was to be a single mother, and how she should at least try to get a real husband now that she and DeMarcus were getting divorced.

Calla didn’t want another husband. Between raising her son, working her shifts, and taking as much overtime as she could, Calla was too tired to be bothered with the demands of a

committed relationship. However, to put an end to Millie's sermons, Calla accepted an invitation from other nurses on her floor to go to the Saturday night show at the club. A few of the male interns and residents had come along. Calla didn't change her mind about getting a husband, but she did have a good time.

Tonight, the chairs were different. Gone were those curved-back red leather barrel ones, gashes in the seats covered with gray duct tape. Now, the seats were covered in linen, the fabric a subdued checkered pattern. The back of her chair sloped downwards, so she could sink in and rest until her system absorbed the meds she'd taken.

Even with the new chairs and a new manager, Snookie's remained the institution it was. Photos of musicians lined the walls. There were many she could recognize - famous ones like Dizzy, Miles, and Coltrane, along with some of the locals whose day jobs were teaching band at public schools and giving private lessons around the neighborhood when she, Gideon, and DeMarcus were young.

The mirrored wall on her right was smoky, the silver inching across the sheets of glass. In its reflection her wig was crooked, and her face stretched as if in a carnival funhouse. Still, she looked healthier in the dim lights. Her eyes fixed on Gideon's saxophone sitting on the stage in front of the drum kit next to the larger baritone one, shining, glowing in the stage lights as if it were a pulsing orb. Or a heart. Gideon's sax might as well be his heart. She knew his life would end if he lost his music, and she feared that would happen to DJ once she was gone.

A young woman dressed all in black – pants, shirt and tie – shuffled over. Larissa was on the nametag pinned above the girl's breast pocket.

"What can I get you? The bar's not open, but you want a soda?"

"Not right now, Larissa, but when the bar does open would you please bring me a Manhattan? Extra cherries."

"Sure, but it might be a while," she said turning away.

Calla felt Gideon's presence before she saw him at the back of the room. He was larger than she remembered; his belly hanging over top of his belt. His body resembled a balloon with

limbs, full of the air he'd use to blow his horn. In the past 20 years she had put on a few pounds as well. 'Course she'd lost it all and then some, shrinking after every treatment. She'd felt like the scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, the cancer plucking at parts of her body as if it were made of straw. And with each pull, there was pain.

Gideon maneuvered his way through the tables towards the stage. As he crossed under each ceiling light his bald spot shone like Vaseline on a baby's bottom. Despite his size, he moved slow and smooth the way she remembered. He saw her and stopped. His face puzzled as if he remembered but couldn't quite place her. Calla laid both of her hands on the table and braced herself for when recognition came.

"Calla?" He walked to her table, took her hand and squeezed. Calla tried not to wince.

"It's good to see you. You should have told me you were coming. I would have had Junebug waive your cover." He grinned. "How have you been? It's been a long time."

"Yeah. Sure has. I'm not too bad."

He glanced at the purple bruise on the top of her hand extending from the base of her fingers and stroked it as if smoothing a wrinkled cloth. He sat in the chair across from her.

"You still a nurse?"

She slid her hand from Gideon's and placed it on her lap "No, I'm on extended sick leave," she smiled.

"Why?"

Calla stilled at the concern in his voice. He scrutinized her face lingering on the pallor in her cheeks she'd tried to conceal with thick makeup. She trembled, lowered her head. Speaking its name aloud gave cancer more power; the telling was almost as bad as the disease. She took a deep breath, watching as he studied her body, taking in her shrunken frame, the wig, the penciled in eyebrows. She noticed how the awareness moved from his fingers, through his arm, to his shoulders, until his whole body stiffened as if preparing for a blow.

"Cancer?" he said in a soft whisper.

She nodded, anticipating his next question. “Pancreas. Doctors say I have a few more months left, tops.”

“I’m sorry, Calla. So, so sorry. I’m glad you came. I’m happy to see you –“

Even though he didn’t say it, Calla heard the words. “- one last time.”

The soft clamor of voices rose as the room filled with other patrons. Servers wove among the tables taking orders and returning with trays of glasses. Larissa placed a Manhattan in front of Calla, then turned to Gideon. “You want somethin’?”

“Yeah. I’d appreciate a ginger ale, thanks.”

They waited until Larissa returned with the can and a glass of ice. Gideon opened his soda and poured. Calla’s hands circled her glass feeling the droplets cool.

“Here’s to old times.” Gideon raised his glass.

Calla did the same. “The best of times,” she said. They clinked, then drank.

Calla smiled and counted in her head as the tension between them mounted.

Gideon leaned back in the chair, folded his arms across his chest, and stretched out his legs. “I’ve been coming to play at Snookie’s for years.”

She heard the accusation in his voice, but she held the ultimate trump card. “Well, you know, Gideon,” she smiled, “with work and raising my son, I haven’t been going out much. Cancer is that wakeup call that the things you’ve been telling yourself, you’ll get to,” her voice cracked for effect, “you’d better get to now.”

He had the grace to look chagrined, scooted his chair forward, and placed his hands on the table. “Do you need anything? Some money maybe?”

“No. Thank you for offering. I wish money could take care of this, but that’s not it.” She took a deep breath and the words whooshed on her exhale. “DJ is 16 now. There’s no one left for him once I’m gone. He plays the saxophone too. He’s good.”

“And?” She heard the doubt in his voice.

“He’s had lessons since he could hold the damn thing,” she smiled. “And he got into the performing arts academy. It’s now downtown, did you know? The kids who come out of that school, a lot of them are making it in the music industry.”

“Is Simon still teaching over there?”

“No, he retired a few years ago.”

“So who’s your kid been working with?”

“Tony Fambro.”

“The best side sax man in Chicago. He’s real selective about who he takes on.”

Her voice rich with pride she continued, “Please, Fambro’s reach goes way beyond Chicago. DJ’s been with him for three years now. Summers he’s had master classes with Chris Hall, and last year with Willie Conrad. You know you audition for those. They don’t just take anyone, and of course, the saxophone is the most competitive instrument...”

“Ok. Calm down. So, he’s got some talent.” He sipped his ginger ale. “I played with Willie in London a few years ago.”

“I said he was good, Gideon. It’s not just because I’m his mother. I do know a little bit about music you know.”

Gideon smiled. “Yeah, I remember Mr. Stephens always picked you for the solos. You sure did have some pipes, Calla.”

She picked up one of the cherries, bit it off the stem.

“We were going to hit the road together, remember? What name did we finally agree on for our group?”

“The GeeDeeCee Review,” she smiled. “It took us an hour to convince DeMarcus to accept the vote. He hated not getting his way.”

“You’re right about that, and he didn’t practice enough either.”

“Which is the ultimate sin for Gideon Banks.”

Like my father always said, “the more you practice,” Calla chimed in, “the better you’ll get.”

Gideon grinned. "I'm really glad you came, Calla."

A man stepped on stage from behind the curtain, nodded to Gideon, picked up the bass guitar, and began strumming.

"I gotta go," he rose from his chair. "You gonna stay for the set, aren't you?"

"Oh yeah. It's been too long since I've heard you play live." Calla smiled. Gideon smiled back.

The band began with a classic Horace Silver tune, *Liberated Brother*, and Calla gasped at the power of it. She had forgotten how talented Gideon was. She'd bought all his albums, then his CD's. It's no wonder DJ chose the saxophone as his instrument. Over and over Gideon's music had been cranked up to blare throughout their home. Hearing it live the energy and strength of the music was like a cool wind blowing over her body, a current of joy. She closed her eyes and breathed the goodness into the pain of her brittle joints, her hands and arms relaxing as the band segued into Strayhorn's *Lush Life*. The next tune was a bouncy rendition of *In a Mellow Tone*, and she reveled in it. The music managed to massage all her ills: the pain, the grief, the fear.

Calla drifted into memories of Gideon and DeMarcus bouncing up the stairs – still in their pajamas – to where she waited on the top floor of her grandmother's three flat building. They'd watched *Scooby Doo* and *Archie* and sang along with the *School House Rock* on the couch in the living room, she seated in the middle, Gideon on her left, DeMarcus on her right. And she would swear that in the music, she also heard the ham sizzling in the iron skillet and Millie smoothing pancake batter with a wooden spoon. She wished DJ had those same memories of grandparents, "play" cousins, and neighbors, a community of folks to watch over him. Then she wouldn't be so anxious about her son's future, and maybe, could die in peace.

After the applause faded, Gideon placed his horn on its stand and slipped behind the curtain with the rest of the band. He returned moments later, sweat beaded on his forehead, a white towel around his neck. Fans had hung around to shake his hand. Gideon was cordial and cut off the longer winded ones with a handshake and a smile. When he returned to her table she

applauded and said, “That was amazing. No wonder you got that Grammy nomination. I always wanted to ask you what that felt like.”

His entire body swelled with confidence and his smile beamed. “It was awesome. ‘Course it would have been better if I’d won.”

“Next year for sure.” “Yeah, next year.” He stared at the ceiling and stroked his chin. “Listen Calla, I am glad you came to the show. It was good to see you. Really good. I’m sorry for your pain. You have my sympathy, but I don’t think I can...”

Calla cut him off. “Please, Gideon. Please. I don’t want him to land in some foster home. And if he’s alone,” her voice caught on her fear, “you know the streets grind up young black men, old ones too. I don’t want DJ doin’ drugs, in jail, or in a box.”

He sighed and crossed his arms. “Calla. I’m just not up for that kind of responsibility.”

Calla lifted her glass to signal to the server to bring her another Manhattan. She felt the twinges of pain in her body as the medication wore off. She couldn’t take another pill; alcohol would have to do.

“Don’t they have you on meds? You shouldn’t mix those with alcohol.”

To her own ears her laugh sounded like sandpaper on wood. “Doctors have given up on me, Gideon. Most days I’m lucky to get out of bed and make it to the bathroom without help. That’s a pass to drink, eat, and do whatever I want.”

Gideon looked around at the people milling about. More were entering through the door. He signaled with a nod to a young man collecting dirty glasses who nodded back. Gideon raised his glass and pointed. The young man nodded again.

Larissa returned with Calla’s Manhattan, a glass of ice and another can of ginger ale. She looked at Gideon, “I’ve got to close out my tickets ‘fore the next show. You gonna settle up?”

“Sure. Put everything on the band’s tab. Calla, let’s continue this conversation somewhere else.” He stood and offered her his hand. Calla took it.

“Come on,” said Gideon. “This way.”

Gideon opened a door to the left of the bar. Inside was an office with a desk, two chairs, a sofa and coffee table on which Gideon placed Calla's drink. Gideon turned the nearest chair around so that he could face Calla.

"I figure we could use the privacy," he sat.

Calla nodded and sat down.

"DeMarcus was my best friend, Calla."

"Mine too," she said in a soft voice. "All of us were really good friends."

"Then why? Why would you...?" Gideon shook his head and looked down at his lap.

She knew what he was asking. Why did you betray me by marrying DeMarcus? Why do you think I would take your son, his son?

The early camaraderie between them wilted as the silence lengthened.

"You're divorced now, aren't you, Gideon?"

He nodded.

"What happened?"

Gideon looked down at his feet. When he raised his head he said, "I guess I was on the road too much. It makes it hard to keep a relationship going when you're not even there. And," he shifted in his chair, "she wanted a family, children."

"Hmm, hmm."

"It wouldn't have been that way with you, Calla."

"You sure about that?"

He took another drink from the can. "When I came back to Chicago for Dad's funeral and saw you with DeMarcus, I was so hurt and angry. You'd told me that you loved me. That you'd wait. I knew then I wasn't being fair, but," he shrugged, "it was a chance of a lifetime, to go to Europe, play music, see the world."

Calla nodded.

"So that's why you," his hands searched the air for a word, "'got involved' with DeMarcus?"

“Come on Gideon. We were what? 19? We were experimenting. That’s what happens when you’re healthy, the hormones are going, and you have sex. It had nothing to do with you at all. In fact, I think it was more because of the absence of you.

‘We both missed you. And when I found out I was pregnant, we got married. It’s what you did.’

Gideon nodded.

“I’m glad I have DJ, and I love him with all my heart, but I didn’t plan on being with DeMarcus.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It just happened.” She coughed and drank. “If only you had kept in touch or something.”

“I wrote you!”

Calla’s voice rose. “Shit, I got three postcards. Three. And what did they say?” She held up her hand and raised her thumb, “Wish you were here.” She added the index finger, “Having a great time.” “It’s so beautiful.” She raised her middle finger. “By that time, that’s what I thought about you.”

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