

1

CAMILLE

Right after Ruby's death, I started reading the obituaries. I stopped a couple of years later, because it seemed morbid. But in the past few months, I found myself searching through them again, because friends and relatives seemed to die for no good reason.

I never saw anyone I knew personally in the obits after Ruby, but every so often I turned to the section and read through the names, anticipating anyone I might know. Lately, I hadn't even been reading the news. Too depressing. Instead, I poured myself a second cup of coffee, pushed my glasses up on the bridge of my nose, opened the *New York Times*, and immediately turned to the columns titled Deaths. And today Death did not disappoint. It had taken another friend, or rather a memory of a friend.

"Jewel Jamison dead at 64. The founder and head of Onyx Management, America's premiere entertainment agency in black media, died in her penthouse apartment in New York City. The publicist for the agency said there are no surviving relatives. Provisions are being made to continue the agency despite the loss of its founder."

I searched for my cell phone in my pocketbook beneath my keys and a half-eaten bag of pretzels. Three missed calls told me she knew. My voice mail confirmed it.

“Camille, call me” was the first message.

“Camille, you’ll never guess who’s dead. Give me a call” was the second message.

The third message just said, “Jewel’s dead. Call me. Gotta tell you, girl. Call me.”

I thought I heard a snicker in her voice. I touched the Call Back button. The phone rang only once. “Camille, hated to leave the message like that...”

“Saundra, I know. I just read it in the *Times*.”

“I saw it on this Black Enterprise News show on cable.”

“Did they say what she died of?”

“No, but they said she was sick for more than a year. The hospice nurse said that she died alone in her apartment...no visitors in months.”

“Just like I said. Remember how she was that last...never mind.” I had said too much.

“You didn’t listen to me. I kept tryin’ to tell you...” She paused, and the silence filled my ear. “When did we...”

“I don’t know. I tried...couldn’t fix it...” I felt a pang of guilt.

“Those black movies, with the girlfriends’ arms wrapped around each other, with some soulful music playing in the background—that’s not real.”

I didn’t know how it had all started. Saundra’s comments boxed me in with it. “I don’t know.” I felt an edge in my voice, and there was a bitter taste in my mouth.

“This is 2012, then...was it twenty years ago that we got back together? Camille, where did the time go?” Saundra muttered something, but I was too trapped in my memories to hear her.

“Time took us in different directions,” I said out loud before I could edit myself. “Things were said that couldn’t be unsaid.” I feared that I was not faultless, and my own regret was hidden in my memories like a timeworn stone.

I tried to piece together my recollections to understand what had gone so wrong between us...when? I recalled that I had reached

out to Sandra and to Jewel because of the deep void I felt. I remembered it was the fall of 1992...

September 8, 1992

There are no wildflowers in Williamsburg. There were only the occasional dandelions that grew in the cracks of the sidewalks just because they felt like it, and so the children could pick them on their way to school. "You want a wish?" one little girl said as she gave one to me. All of them were gone now. Desperation about surviving permeated the air.

I wrote in my journal the morning of the first day of school that year in my last few moments of solitude. Septembers always made me tense. It was the timing. Beginnings of the ends. The night before, I had put away my writings and my watercolors and mentally given up my whenever-we-want-to time reading to my son, Shawn. I was facing the new school year at PS 31 in the midst of the teeming tenements of Williamsburg, which spilled their contents out into the streets like so much wasted milk.

It was 6:25 a.m., and I was already late. I gulped the last of my coffee down and woke Shawn. It was his first day of kindergarten, so he rushed into the bathroom without being told and came to the table to eat his Cheerios, already carrying his backpack.

"I have my pencils, and my sharpener, and my notebook, and my crayons," he said, dropping it on the floor next to him.

I remember putting him on the school bus at 110th Street and Central Park North. He said, "What do I have for lunch, Ma?" and I said, "Tuna sandwich," and he said, "Yum!" He climbed the stairs of the bus and waved, and the doors closed behind him. I trekked down the stairs into the subway, with its offensive odors stuffing themselves into my nostrils and people pushing past me. I slid my token into the slot, pushed through the turnstile, and rushed to get into the D train as the doors closed. I got out at Fourteenth Street, made my way to the

M train, and finally walked down the stairs from the el to Flushing Avenue.

It was barely eight o'clock, and it was already wet hot. Down on the street, young girls with painted faces sauntered about pushing baby strollers, stretching themselves up to see and to be seen. Old women with sagging cheeks and fingers like fat sausages, weighted down with sacks of food, tugged toddlers along beside them. On the side street near the school, men sat wearing white athletic shirts, slapping dominoes on card tables tilted toward nowhere in particular. Strains of *merengue* and salsa spilled from windows with a booming, garbled rap, creating a cacophony, which intruded into everyone's consciousness. No wildflowers.

When I got in to the school, Ruby Greene, the principal and my dear friend, and Saul Elliot, the other assistant principal, asked me to come into the office. They had a list of eight new students we needed to place. I suggested we place them with the teachers we knew would welcome them and not squawk, at least not for them to hear. Saul called the custodian to ask for additional chairs to be brought up while I went out to the yard to deliver the news to the teachers.

"Ms. Warren, you have got to be kidding me," a wonderful young teacher whispered to me, pointing to the long line of students already in front of her. As I looked into the eyes of the children standing on line talking to their friends, I spotted one little one tapping the child in front of him and then ducking to hide. They always made me laugh. They made fun out of so little. But now, seeing the long line of children twisted me up inside. Budget cuts throughout the city had left us reeling, and there was no end in sight. There was a sense of hanging on by one's fingernails.

It was two thirty when Mrs. Salgano, the school aide, came into the book room, where I was doing inventory and looking for additional books for too many children.

"Sylvia said she needs you in the office right away." The look on her face made me anxious.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. She just called me in and said to run and go get you.”

I put down the worn reader with its frayed cover, clapped the dust from my hands, and grabbed one of the wet paper towels I had been using to wipe away the grime on the bookshelves. I caught sight of myself in the broken pane of glass in the door leading to the hallway. I was glad I had gotten my hair cut, because my Afro was in place. I frowned at my too-full face. I tucked my blouse into my skirt and walked as fast as I could, trying to catch up with the tiny woman, who always seemed in a hurry.

As a second-year assistant principal, I had been called to the office like that only once before, when Shawn was ill. When that thought came back to me, I held my breath, scared to death. In my mind’s eye, I saw him waving good-bye as he got on the school bus this morning. I could not breathe. My mother said I was always fearful because he was a “late-life baby” and my only. I walked as fast as I could.

As I entered the outer office, the secretary, Sylvia, ran out of the principal’s office and began talking so fast I could hardly tell what she was saying.

“Ms. Warren, I called 911 twice already. It’s Mrs. Greene. She’s in there.”

I moved past her into the principal’s office to find my friend, Ruby, slumped in the chair behind her desk. A small paper cup had overturned on it, and water was seeping into layers of paper with fading ink. I heard Sylvia’s raised shrill voice say, “But this is the third time I am calling.”

It was strange to see Ruby so crumpled. She was a tall, strapping woman with square shoulders and the same proud, erect bearing that my grandmother had tried to instill in me. “Stand up straight,” she’d say.

“Camille?” Ruby tried to summon a smile. “I need to lie down.” Her strong, booming, preacher-like voice was now thin and reedy.

Her mahogany-brown skin had lost its reddish cast and now seemed like gray clay that could be pushed and squeezed into any expression one wished. I took her arm and tried to support her back to move her to the sofa while Ruby rested herself against the wooden desk. Then I felt Ruby's weight give way, slipping out of my grip a little at a time, and then tumbling, like one of the huge sacks of rice Ma would buy when I was a girl. I could feel Ruby's body escape from my grasp and hit the floor, elbow, wrist, hand. Once her body rested there, I cradled her head. I wanted to tell her how much I had learned from her.

"Camille, call my son. His number is over there." Her finger lifted and seemed to indicate a direction near her desk, though I wasn't sure where.

"Ruby, don't you worry. We've called for an ambulance, and everything will be fine."

Her eyes flashed, stopping my words of comfort in my mouth and stuffing them down my throat. The fear and anger in Ruby's eyes seemed to squeeze all sound from the room. It was curious how quiet it became at that moment. I had grown accustomed to Ruby's strength. She was like so many of Ma's church-lady friends. She was unflappable. This stare was unnerving. It seemed to say she was outraged at her body for betraying her. It demanded my honesty. I tried to tell her I loved her with my eyes, but despite how I tried, Ruby seemed to slip off to a space far away. The room fell silent.

The paramedics disturbed the calm. They pushed their way into the small space. The tall man took hold of Ruby's wrist while the short, sturdy woman asked me what had happened.

"I have pain here," Ruby said, taking charge for a brief moment and then gasping to take in air. Her eyes rolled back in her head. The two paramedics pushed me out of the way. The man hovered over her and began pounding on her chest, rhythmically bobbing up and down, while the woman darted from one place to another, bringing in a metallic suitcase and then a rolling stretcher.

The female paramedic commanded us to step back out of the way. Her tenor voice pushed me back against the wall. Then there was a mask placed over Ruby's face, and they lifted her up and out. They said something about Woodhull Hospital, and they were gone, leaving a gaping hole in the room.