

Damis (from the Book Listen To My Kaleidoscope)

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Thursday nights were always a popular night at the Rib House restaurant on Broadway Avenue. The owner always rolled out his portable karaoke machine so patrons could slaughter many of their favorite songs from the eighties. Kids ran throughout the restaurant without any complaints from preoccupied adults. The smell of sauce-smothered ribs could be smelled blocks away. If people were not seated they were standing and waiting for to-go orders.

These nights were date nights for Damis and his wife Jackee. Damis would drop the children off at his parents' house so he and Jackee could have a fun night out together. They would always return to the place where they had met, The Rib House. Damis never knew that the woman who had spilled rib sauce on his new white sneakers would later be jumping the broom with him. The two didn't partake in the karaoke but they enjoyed the torture by those who did.

"You still owe me a pair of new white sneakers," Damis said with a smirk.

"Alright, I'll tell my husband to pay you," Jackee said laughing.

"You did that because you knew you wanted me."

"Yeah but I was going to get you anyway. I could've had you and ribs that weren't dry."

"Damis, can I ask a favor?"

"No you can't have no more sauce. From now on your sauce gets put on in the kitchen."

"No not that. I want to ask can we come here forever? I want to come here even when we're old."

"I'll tell you what, as long as you come here I'm coming here with you."

"Can I ask something else?"

"Sure."

"Get me another purple pop."

"That's not a question that's an order."

"There is a thank you coming when you complete that order," Jackee said with a wink.

Damis rose from his seat and walked over to the counter.

"May I help you?"

“Yeah, I’ll take another grape pop please.”

The woman quickly walked over to the soda machine and covered the ice in the Styrofoam cup with grape soda.

“A dollar fifteen.”

Damis handed the woman exact change as he thanked her.

As he pivoted to his left, Damis felt his left shoulder crash into someone causing the soda to fall to the floor.

“Hey man, watch where you’re going!”

The man who bumped Damis halted his steps. His bald head glistened in the lights of the restaurant. A long white t-shirt hung over his thin frame. His baggy black jeans sagged down to where it seemed his back pockets covered the backs of his legs. The man slowly turned around showing his designer sunglasses with golden logos on each side. His neck was adorned with several gold chains of various shapes and sizes. Both hands were decorated with gold rings. He slowly flashed a smile exposing golden teeth.

“Boy, you messed up now,” the deep voiced man said.

“Nah, you messed up. You the one walking around like you wearing clown shoes. Next time watch where you’re going!”

“Oh, we got something here,” the man said still smiling.

Four other men stood and flanked him. The karaoke stopped abruptly. Silence floated over the restaurant as all eyes went to Damis and the man. The man slowly took off his sunglasses exposing his eyes. His left eye was bright yellow and the right dark orange. The two men stood inches apart from each other eye to eye. Both displayed clenched jaws and twisted lips. Damis slowly began to form a ball with his right hand behind his back. Once his fist was completed he slowly began to draw back his elbow in anticipation.

“Gentlemen please,” the owner pleaded.

“There are kids and old folk around. We don’t need this. Take it somewhere else. Beast, c’mon man.”

“You right. We out,” Beast said to the owner.

“But I’m going to make one thing clear to you, punk,” Beast said turning to Damis.

“You are not allowed in this restaurant no more. If I see you here don’t try to run because you can’t outrun death.”

“You ain’t the mayor of Lorain. I can go anywhere I want to. You can’t check me!”

“Try me punk,” the man said smiling as he put on his shades and backed out of the entrance along with his friends. In the parking lot he turned and blew a kiss toward Damis. The group jumped into an old black van and sped out of the parking lot.

Later at the house Damis and Jackee were preparing for bed. Damis stepped out of the bathroom to find Jackee tucked in the bed. Damis lightly walked over and placed himself underneath the blanket.

“Hey. You sleep?”

“Yep,” Jackee answered.

“Date night’s not over. No kids.”

“No I’m good,” Jackee said pulling the majority of the blanket to her side.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you?”

Jackee sat up in the bed.

“You just had to stand up to dude in the restaurant didn’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah I did. I’m not going to let no man tell me where I can and can’t eat. I’m a grown man. Even my own daddy don’t tell me where I can and can’t go.”

“You didn’t know him or what he could have had.”

“That fake wasn’t going to do nothing.”

“You don’t know that. We both could have been hurt, not just you.”

“If he wasn’t frontin’ and if I didn’t stand up, they definitely would have done something to us. Listen, I don’t mess with nobody. I don’t start stuff. But if someone starts with me I’m gonna to finish it.”

“Fine, have fun finishing things yourself,” Jackee sniped as she immersed herself back into the blanket.

Damis vanished into the bathroom and came out wearing jeans and a Cleveland baseball jersey.

“Where are you going?”

“Out for a walk,” Damis answered as he put on his white sneakers.

“No, it’s late. Damis, come to bed.”

“I’ll be back.”

Damis walked out of the bedroom closing the door behind him. He walked down the stairs and out the front door.

“Damis don’t do this,” Jackee said in her robe standing in the front entrance.

“I’ll be back I promise. Go back to bed.”

Jackee turned inside.

“Hey.”

Jackee turned around.

“No wannabe thug or argument can stop me from loving you. Nothing will change that. You hear me?”

“Yeah,” Jackee answered with a smile as she closed the door.

With the moonlight as his guide Damis made his way behind the houses of Chelsea Avenue. Behind the houses was a small stream that eventually led to the Black River.

“Man, the moon is so bright tonight I can see the frogs playing in the stream.”

Damis continued on with his stroll. He looked ahead for the opening of the river.

“I should have reached it by now,” Damis thought.

He saw a clearing ahead he was not familiar with. He didn’t recognize any of the buildings. He made his way to the clearing and found himself standing on a street that was not Chelsea Avenue or the neighboring Riverside Drive.

Damis was surrounded by various houses with large spaces between them. As he continued down the road, the distance between houses decreased. He continued walking to find department stores, diners and bars. An occasional classic car passed by on the road.

Damis saw a group of men running in his direction. They ran past him and stopped in their tracks. They were all wearing slacks and white t-shirts, with varying jackets. Each one of the men wore brown and black loafers. One of them wore an old style hat. They turned to look at Damis and jogged up to him.

“Boy what are you doing out this time of night? We told everybody to stay in their houses ‘til morning. You didn’t get word?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Damis answered.

“Negro if you don’t run the man is gonna skin you alive.”

“What man?”

“The white man! Now let’s go!”

Damis took off with the men. They ran three blocks and down one alley. They reached an inconspicuous home and ran up onto the porch. The man with the hat hit the door with a specific knock and the door immediately opened. They all poured into the home and vanished behind the closed door.

The men sat on the couches and chairs that hugged the walls of the living room. Damis sat on the carpeted floor. Everyone was struggling to find breath.

"I'll get y'all some water," a tall thin woman said as she walked into the kitchen.

Damis could feel all eyes focused on him. He panned the room to see everyone's mouths agape in his direction.

"What in Jesus' name are you wearing?"

"Shoes, jeans and a jersey," Damis answered.

"I ain't never seen any shoes like that before. Your pants are for a fat person. The same with your baseball uniform. Cleveland's baseball team has different uniforms than that."

"I'm dressed fine. Why are all of you dressed like you're in the forties or something?"

"Because this is the forties," the man in the hat said.

Damis quickly stood up and ran to the window. He looked at all of the classic cars on the small street.

"Boy, get out of that window before you get us all lynched," the man with the hat said.

"I know y'all was raised better than that. Make that boy feel at home first before asking him crazy questions."

The woman followed her words with a tray of glasses full of ice water. She made her way around the room losing one glass with each visit.

"The forties," Damis whispered.

"Sir, my name is Gladys. The two guys on the sofa are Bernard and Melvin. The other two on the couch are David and Ben. The guy with the hat is Martin."

"Nice to meet all of you."

"What's your name?"

"Damis, Damis Crawford."

"Where are you from, Damis Crawford?"

"I'm from Lorain."

"Lorain? Never heard of it," Martin said.

“Where is Lorain?”

“Ohio, near Lake Erie,” Damis answered wearing a perplexed expression.

“Ohio? Boy you must have been a walking fool,” David said laughing.

Everyone ceased laughing.

“Damis, you a long way from Ohio. This is Alabama,” Martin stated.

“Alabama? The forties?”

“Definitely not Ohio that’s for sure,” Ben said.

“And what year did you say you were from anyway?”

“2009,” Damis whispered.

The guys burst into laughter once again. As the men continued to howl Bernard stopped and stared at Damis.

“What’s the future like?”

Everyone stopped laughing in anticipation of Damis’ response.

“Well let’s see. Everyone has a computer in their house. Everyone uses the internet.”

“Internet?”

“Yeah, you can talk to other people and watch television and listen to music. It’s like everyone’s computers are connected together. Oh, and we just got our first black president.”

Once again everyone began to laugh.

“You don’t believe me? Here I’ll show you.”

Damis dug into his front pocket and pulled out his cell phone. Everyone moved back as he unlocked the device. He showed them a photo of the president.

“What is that?”

“It’s the president.”

“Not the guy. That thing you’re holding.”

“It’s a cell phone. You can make phone calls on it. I don’t have any bars so I can’t call.”

“Bars?”

“Enough of these toys and tricks,” Martin barked.

“In a couple of days we are going to change this country. We need every man. Since Damis is here he’s going to help. Everyone go home and get some rest.”

Martin turned towards Damis’ direction without looking directly at him.

“I don’t know where you from. I don’t know who you really are. Honestly, I think you are as crazy as a coon but you have a black face so that means you are in the same boat as us. You can bunk on the couch. Get some sleep.”

Damis was the first to wake up the next morning. He quietly fluffed the pillows on the couch and folded his blanket. He slowly walked over to the door where his shoes rested. He put them on before slipping out the front door.

Damis constricted his eyes to look past the rays of the morning sun. With his hand over his brow he turned left and began walking toward the town center. The main square of the town was filled with classic cars of various colors with large white-walled tires. Men in suits with narrow ties slowly walked up and down the sidewalks. Damis spotted a diner advertising All You Can Eat Pancakes for fifty-five cents. He jogged across the street and walked into the diner.

Damis sat at one of the single stools at the front counter. He took out his wallet from his front pocket and pulled out a dollar. He looked up and found everyone staring directly at him. None of the waitresses or cooks moved. Everyone’s attention was his.

“What you think you doin’ here boy? You must be confused,” an anonymous voice shouted.

“I’m here to get me some of those fifty-five cent pancakes. Can I get some help here?”

Three tall portly men stood up and walked over to where Damis was seated. All three wore tight white T-Shirts. One wore red suspenders to keep his slacks up.

“And here I thought today was going to be boring. Finally a coon decides to get brave and make things interesting.”

“What you call me? You must be the one confused,” Damis said, rising to his feet.

He looked out the window and saw a woman standing with a police officer. She was pointing directly into the diner. The police officer maneuvered his way across the street and into the diner.

“What’s going on here? You boys go back to your business. I’ll take it from here.”

The police officer turned his focus to Damis.

“What in the world are you doing in here? I heard you coloreds were planning on causing trouble ‘round here.”

“I just want to get some breakfast and go home. I don’t know what’s going on here. I don’t know what’s up with everyone’s clothes and these cars and all this old stuff. I just want to eat and go home.”

“Stupid negro can’t even read,” a voice yelled out.

“Look here boy,” the cop said.

“This is a whites only diner. I think there’s a colored diner over in the next town.”

“If they can eat here I can eat here. My money is just as good as anyone’s.”

The police officer snatched the dollar bill from Damis’ hand.

“This thing ain’t even real. Look at the head on it. It’s too big!”

“Sorry sir, this is my slow cousin from out of town,” Martin said as he walked into the diner.

“We’re sorry for causing trouble. We will be on our way, sir,” Martin quickly said as he ushered Damis out the door.

“I know who you are boy! I know you want to cause trouble ‘round here! I’ll have something special for you tomorrow night,” the police officer yelled.

“You trying to get yourself killed?”

“I just wanted to get some breakfast real quick before I get out of this nightmare.”

“Listen, you ain’t in no 2009 and this ain’t no Ohio. I don’t know where you’re really from but tonight you are a black man in Bama in the year of 1945. You need to stay at the house until tonight...”

Martin fell silent and lowered his head as two white women walked by.

“The plan has been moved up to tonight. We need to do it tonight.”

Martin and Damis walked up the front steps and through the front door of the house.

“What’s happening tonight?”

“We’re going to march on the main square at midnight. Every black man will march for freedom starting tonight. It’s time we stand up and be treated like men no matter the consequences.”

“No matter the consequences? You are going to lead your friends and family to their deaths!”

“If we continue with the way things are now we’re already dead. Not only are we dead but so are our children and our grandchildren. Tonight we make a stand.”

“Tonight you make a stand. I’m trying to get back to my wife and kids.”

“You best be with us because after tonight things here will never be the same.”

Martin opened the front door.

“Do yourself a favor and stay here until tonight. People are going to be looking for a funny dressed colored man with fake money.”

Martin stepped out of the door closing it behind him. Damis sat on the couch and rested his head on the armrest. He closed his eyes and imagined Jackee sitting next to him. He closed his own hand imagining it was hers. His eyes clenched closed as he thought of how their last date ended.

“Damis? I brought you a sandwich. You must be starved,” Ben said

Damis quickly grabbed the sandwich and began stuffing it into his mouth.

“Thank you,” he said with a full mouth.

“I bet you never had a sandwich like that before.”

“Yeah, we have wish sandwiches where I’m from too.”

“Damis, may I ask you a question if you don’t mind?”

“No Ben, go ahead. What do you want to know?”

“Well, I would like to know more about your time.”

“So you believe me?”

“No, but I would still like to hear what you have to say. It’s hard to imagine a black president.”

“Well we have one. Things are different. This black and white separate thing is unheard of. Anyone can eat anywhere they want. Whites have to give blacks the same respect given.”

“So what we’re doing here now worked?”

“Yeah, I think so. Things ain’t perfect but it’s better in 2009 than it is in 1945.”

Ben slumped onto the recliner in the corner wearing a large smile.

“Damis, we should get some rest. We’re going to change the world tonight.”

Damis sat back on the couch with one leg up and closed his eyes.

“Damis. Damis, wake up. It’s time,” Melvin said shaking him.

Damis stretched out his arms and stood up. He lumbered over to his shoes and placed them on his feet. Once ready, he followed Melvin out of the living room and into the kitchen. The room was filled with black men of all ages all wearing the most serious of faces. Each of

them was dressed in all-black suits, white shirts and black ties. Small conversations were being conducted simultaneously around the living room. A few glances went toward Damis.

“Is this the crazy negro who thinks he’s from the future?”

Martin stood on a stool and raised his hand in the air. All commotion ceased.

“Everyone look around,” Martin said calmly.

“I see a room full of men. Not colored men, not negros, not coons but men. When the founding fathers created this country they mentioned men having the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We are men aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” the men answered in unison.

“We are men! We are men that for some reason have been denied our unalienable rights. This is unacceptable. It is unacceptable for one color of man to direct, dictate and dominate another color of man. Our fellow brothers of man have been ignorant to the definition of what a man is. Tonight begins the reminder of what men are. Tonight begins the education of what men are. Tonight begins the echoing of our voices screaming we are men!”

The room full of men erupted in cheers and chants with fists waving in the air. Martin held up a single open hand and the men fell silent.

“We will express ourselves tonight in a way they are not expecting. They are expecting beasts but they will get men. They anticipate violence but we will offer peace. They will wait for yelling and we will give them song.”

Martin began to sing his favorite hymn as he opened the door. As he stepped out of the door, the group of men followed. As each passed through the doorway they began to sing along with Martin. Damis was the last man to leave closing the door behind him but not singing. The men slowly walked down the street toward the center of town. As the group approached the center they could see the flicker of torches glowing brighter with each step. From the distance they could hear voices mocking them.

“C’mon down boys! We ‘gone have us a good ole coon barbecue!”

Undeterred by the heckling, the men advanced forward singing louder than when they first left the house. Someone grabbed Damis’s arm and directed him to the left. He saw the silhouette of a man darting down the street. Damis chased after him. The distance between houses increased incrementally. Once trees outnumbered houses the silhouette stopped running. Damis jogged up to the silhouette and turned the man around.

“Ben, what are you doing?”

“You say you’re from the future but I don’t believe you. Even though I don’t exactly believe what you say there’s a chance that it may be true. If it is true, what you say, then what we are doing here worked.”

“I promise you things are better where I’m from. They aren’t perfect but they are better.”

Ben took a cigarette from his front shirt pocket and struggled to place it between his quivering lips. He struggled just as much to light it.

“You know my momma always told me not to fool with that black magic but there is a story about things happening during the large gray moon. When we found you the big gray moon was in the sky. This is the spot where we found you. Tonight is the last night for this kind of moon. This may be the last big gray moon for a while. I’m guessin’ if you go the way you came, you will get to where you came from.”

“Thanks, Ben. I won’t forget this.”

Damis gave Ben a quick hug and turned to walk into the woods.

“Hey Damis,” Ben called.

“Yeah?”

“When you get back to the future, tell my grandkids what happened here. Tell them we did what we did to make life better for them. Many people think that what we’re doing here is stupid and we’re fools. They just think we’re going to get ourselves killed for nothing. We may die but it won’t be for nothing. I would rather die doing what’s right than to live being treated like a dog. Please tell them that we weren’t fools.”

“Ben I never heard you talk about kids. I’ve never seen you around any kids. I didn’t know you had any.”

“Well see, Gladys and I have been going steady for some time now. She’s carrying my son in her belly. She won’t marry me because she thinks I’m going to go and get myself killed.”

“Well alright then,” Damis said smiling.

“I have to get back to my wife,” he said entering the woods.

“Remember to tell them about us,” Ben yelled into the woods.

Guided by the moon, Damis made his way through the woods and to the stream. He walked along the edge of the stream looking at more familiar surroundings. He eventually recognized the homes that decorated Riverside Drive. He emerged from the woods and walked

down the street until he saw the sign for Chelsea Avenue. He slowly walked up to the front door. He began to turn the knob when the door flew open.

“Damis, never do that again,” Jackee said and she lunged toward Damis to hug him.

“I’m sorry I was gone so long. I got lost.”

“You must have been really lost to be in the woods for a whole hour.”

“An hour?”

“Well not exactly an hour but almost. I was so worried.”

He grabbed her and gave her a long kiss.

“If I’m ever in another time or another place, I am always with you.”

The following week Damis and Jackee were finishing their rib dinners at the Rib House.

“See I told you there would be no problem,” Damis said as he tossed a handful of fries into his mouth.”

“I’m glad. This is our spot. I couldn’t imagine not coming here,” Jackee said with a smile.

The couple dumped their trash into the bins and walked over to the door.

“It’s about to pour,” Damis said.

“I’ll go get the car.”

“No,” Jackee said grabbing his arm.

“Let’s race. The winner gets a foot massage.”

“Sounds good to me. Three, two…”

Jackee shoved Damis and took off into the downpour. By the time Damis stepped out of the door Jackee was waiting for him in the car. Damis stood in the middle of the parking lot laughing.

“Well well well, looks like someone didn’t take me seriously.”

Three sets of headlights turned on highlighting Damis. He turned around and saw Beast standing on the opposite side of the parking lot with three men. All four wore oversized sagging black jeans with oversized hooded gray sweatshirts.

“If my memory serves me right, I could have sworn I told you never to come back here again. Am I mistaken?”

“Yeah I think that’s what you said,” Damis answered.

“That’s what I thought. So what are you doing here?”

“I was hungry.”

Beast and the three men began to laugh.

“But I tell you when you’re hungry,” Beast said with a serious face.

“No man can tell me when I’m hungry or not. No man can tell me where I can and cannot eat. Too much work has been put in for that.”

“True. But you would be shocked at what orders fools take when the steel is on ‘em.”

Beast lifted up his sweater and removed a handgun from the band of his boxers. He began to advance toward Damis pointing the gun at him stopping in the middle of the parking lot. As the rain began to fall, Damis began walking to meet him.

“Are you going to use that to shoot me? Do you think you can kill me with that?”

“I don’t know. Let’s find out.”

Damis walked up to Beast until the barrel of the handgun was inches away from his forehead.

“You can shoot me with that but it won’t kill me,” Damis said with a smirk.

“He’s crazy,” one of the men yelled.

“You can shoot me with that and my body will fall down but I won’t be dead. A man’s life isn’t given or taken by his body. A man’s life is lived through God and his actions. Long after I leave this earth I will live. I will live on through the people my children become. My memories will live in the hearts of my friends and family who knew me. They will tell stories about how I was a good man who loved his wife and family. I will be remembered by the good I have done in this life. Have you done any good? How will you be remembered when you are gone?”

“Don’t try to pull no head games on me! I swear I will blast you right now!”

This is not a head game. This is real. Black men gave their lives so you can hold that gun in your hand. Men were torn apart by dogs, had their skin torn off by fire hoses and you are about to do the work of the men they were fighting against. It’s fine because like I said you can’t kill me. Everyone will remember my name.”

Damis removed his glasses and wiped the rain from them.

“You know, one hundred years from now people will buy this book because of the cute little girl on the cover but they will read this story and understand what kind of man I was.”

Beast’s eyes expanded tenfold.

“What are you talking about?”

Damis placed his hand on top of the barrel of the gun and lowered it. He grabbed Beast and embraced him. He whispered in his ear. The words Damis spoke caused Beast to back away. His eyes were still widened and his mouth hung open exposing his gold teeth. He continued to back away falling down in the slick parking lot. He quickly picked himself up and began to walk quickly backwards without taking his eyes off Damis.

“C’mon we out!”

All the men piled into the cars. They sped off into the rainy night. Damis turned around and stared at his car. He saw Jackee sobbing uncontrollably. He walked over to the car, opened the door and sat in the driver’s seat. Jackee immediately threw her arms around him.

“What did you say to him?”

“I kept a promise to an old friend. I also told him that his grandmother Gladys raised him better than that.”