

A House Made of Stars

by Tawnysha Greene

The last time we go up the mountain where Daddy lived as a boy, he drives, one hand on the wheel. The car leans into each bend and Momma grips the handle on the door, holds her breath when we go around the trucks ahead of us. Snow falls outside and the windshield begins to fog and Daddy bites his sleeve, pulls it over his hand, rubs a circle in front of him that smears, blurs as it fogs over again. Rolling down the window, he sticks his head outside, and snow comes in, melts on his hair, the seat, us behind him. My sister is asleep. It's after midnight.

When we reach the street, the houses are dark, except for one—the grey one with the white trim, chain link fence, black oak tree. The light in the kitchen is on and when Momma gets out, unlocks the fence, Daddy pulls into the driveway, and his sister comes out of the house. She's in her pajamas, an orange blanket around her shoulders, and I see the curtains move upstairs, hands against the window where my cousin looks out.

Daddy turns off the car and sits, watches her and Momma hold hands, talk quietly in the cold. Momma points to the car, to us, and Daddy's sister nods, motions us all to the house, to the light inside.

When they open the car door, I pretend I'm just waking up, and Momma picks up my sister, and I follow them up the driveway, ice slick under my feet, my breaths like clouds. A fire burns in the wood stove and Daddy's sister puts sheets on the floor, the couch, stuffs pillows in cases that smell of lavender—the same laundry soap Momma gets when we go to the Laundromat, watch our clothes tumble dry in big machines.

Everyone whispers now and Daddy's sister looks to the top of the stairs. "He's asleep," she says and I picture my uncle upstairs on the bed and wonder if he lies the way Daddy does when he sleeps, on his stomach, hands in fists beneath a pillow doubled over. Momma lays

her things on the floor where she and Daddy will sleep and wakes my sister, takes us up the stairs.

My cousin's bed creaks as we reach her room. The nightlight is on and I see her form lying down, blankets hastily cast over her, and then I see why—the floor vent by the foot of her bed pulled out, lying on its side where her face had been moments before. She had shown me how she did this last time we were here when Daddy's momma died and we came for the funeral, a butter knife looped underneath the side and pulled up until the vent came free. While our parents sat, cried downstairs, we watched them eat bread, lasagna, sometimes talking, sometimes, saying nothing at all.

When Momma kisses us, goes back down the stairs, we wait until her shadow is gone and crowd near the vent, skin, hair touching as we share the small space. Their voices are low and it's hard to hear and my cousin signs what they say, so that my sister who is deaf can understand. Daddy's momma was deaf, too, and that's why my cousin knows sign, to talk to her when Daddy's momma lived with them before she died.

Momma's talking now. "I'm sorry," she says. "We didn't know it was going be like this."

Daddy's sister is shushing her, and we can see them sitting on the couch. Daddy's already asleep.

Momma mentions the money, how it's gone, that they don't know what to do, and I think of earlier in the day when we were packing our things. The movers had come to take our rented furniture, the red bunk bed, dressers, the couch in the den. We had sold everything else—the chairs, the big table that my sister and I would throw a sheet over, play underneath like we were in a cave. When everything was gone, my sister and I played with the boxes that Momma didn't use, the ones we got from grocery stores, made a covered maze in the den that smelled of oranges, limes—everything the boxes used to hold before.

At the end of the day, the landlord came, and Momma tells Daddy's sister about how he had walked through the house, pointed to dents in walls, the dirty ceiling fan as my sister and me waited in

the den, now empty. The landlord stopped, knelt in the hallway where the carpet was ripped, where Momma had tried stapling it back down.

Momma's whispers gets louder, a move my cousin imitates with her hands, her signs more forceful, her fingers tight around each word as Momma says that she tried to explain, tried to say that everything was like that before, but the landlord had shaken his head, left and Momma sat next to us in the den and cried.

I wait for Momma to tell the part that happened after, when Daddy came home and Momma told him that they didn't get the money, but my cousin's hands are still, the house quiet as we listen through the vent in the floor. Momma's crying and Daddy's sister says that it'll be okay, we can stay as long as we need.

They go to bed, the light's turned off, and we put the vent back where it was before. My sister and I lay down, still in our clothes, and my cousin gives us a blanket from the closet to share. It's a green one with pink squares, torn along the side and as everyone falls asleep, I stare at the stars on the ceiling, stickers that glow in the dark. My cousin had put them up last year, showed me when we stood on her bed as her fingers pointed, traced over the outlines, then turned out the lights, so that I could see them glow.

The stars are dimmer now than what I remember and I run my hands along the tear in the blanket. My fingers catch at the tangled thread and I hold it up against the light of the stars. It's her favorite blanket, one she used to carry as a child, and I wonder if she knows that it is torn, that the corner pieces are rent at the seams.

