

A Safe Place

by Tawnysha Greene

It is my first night in your room, and you teach me to listen—to watch the faces and hands through the vent in the floor since I cannot hear them. But you hear them, and you sign what they say to me. Your fingers go fast, dark and dancing in the shadows. You do not tell me who is speaking, but I know. “The fire took our house...it is okay...we have nothing...you do not have to explain...we have nowhere else to go...stay with us, stay long.” Our parents are talking. Momma and your mother are sisters. You sign like Grandma did, your hands delicate and gentle, barely touching each other between words. She was deaf, too. It snows, and I sleep on the floor beside your bed on blankets and pillows that are soft beneath my head. One of the blankets is green with pink squares and is torn along the side. It was yours, but you sign that it is mine. I am seven and you are nine.

In the morning, I watch you in front of the mirror in the bathroom as you brush your hair and pin it back with bands and clips that match your skirt. When you are done, you stand me in front of the mirror. You wet your hands and smooth them over my hair before you brush it and I feel the water droplets run down my face. The water is cold, but you are warm. Your hands move over my head, brushing, twisting, but I barely feel your fingers. They are gentle, like the way you sign. You smile at me, a closed smile, and start to sing. I read your lips in the mirror. It is a song I do not know.

You take my hand and lead me to your closet that is full of pretty things—bright puffy jackets and sparkly long dresses. The dresses in the back are your mother's and she lets you play dress up with them. Some are yellow, some are blue. The blue one is my favorite—it is heavy and has a slip sewn on underneath, the material silky and smooth when I touch it. You pull out a packet of candy cigarettes and blow the smoke out your mouth. Your fingers hold

the cigarette like I had seen Grandma hold one, and I ask if it is real.

It is Tuesday and you go to school, but Momma keeps me here. When you come back, you bring what I think is snow, but it has feathers and feet and wings. It is a white peacock, a costume for a new play at school. You put it on, and I hold your feathers out. We fly around the house, me and you. Down the stairs, off the beds, down the stairs again, down, down to the ground. Your mother motions for you to stop, but we fly away outside. We go to the trampoline in the yard and you jump. You spread your feathers and close your eyes. You go high in the sky and I sign that you are beautiful.

We fall down in the snow, me and you, and I cannot see you. You hide in the snow, white hands, white arms, white feet. You are buried, but I see your face, your eyes, and your mouth. I lie next to you and put snow on my legs and over my shoes, and, soon, I am white like you. Your mother comes out to find us and we are still in the snow. I see her calling your name, but you do not move. She passes by and I think it is a game.

Night again and you play music on the stereo in your room. You play it loud, so I can feel the sounds in my feet, my hands, my head. I put my hands on your stereo and feel the words through my skin. Your mouth is moving, and for a moment, I am lost, until you begin to sign what you are singing. Your eyes are closed like they were when you were a white peacock. *One day, I'll fly away.* It is from *Moulin Rouge*. Your hands sing for me, but I know you are not here. You are somewhere far away.

When you open your eyes, I sign, asking where you want to go and for a long time, you do not sign a word. Somewhere, you sign, somewhere away from here. I do not understand. It is safe here, I want to sign, safe here in the mountains with you. Here where we can wash the dishes together after our family eats dinner, you washing, me rinsing, and us both putting the cups and plates away. Where we can sit on the cold floor of the bathroom in the mornings, our breaths like clouds, and paint our nails, you outlining

the design in pencil before putting on the paint. I want to sign these things as I sit with you in your room, but my hands do not say anything.

In the morning, me and my parents move to the room above your garage. It was for Grandma before she died. It is small and the walls are white, not wooden like yours and the room smells of pine and cigarette smoke. At night, I take the blanket—the green one with pink squares that is torn along the side, the one you gave me—and wear it like a coat. It has one of your hairs on it, soft and brown and curling at the end. I think of our first morning in front of the mirror and the hairbrush that we shared—the hairs in it brown from you, blonde from me. I miss this day and when I cannot sleep, I watch your window from my room until your light goes out. Sometimes, I can see you dancing and I know the song you are playing.

Momma says we will stay a few weeks. It becomes months.

Sometimes, I sleep in your room on the weekends and you ask me to stay. When you are here, he will not come, you sign. I ask who and you sign his name, “Daddy,” but you do not sign the word, but spell it with your fingers, slow like it is a secret. You show me your neck, your side, and the inside of your leg. I see the bruises and they are hard where I touch. You show me in the dark with the lights off and I see you only by the light of the moon outside your window. I do not know why he hurts you. I do not tell Momma, because I want to stay with you. I want to keep you safe.

Some nights, you wake me up. We have to hide, you tell me, and I follow you in the dark. You take me to a closet with boxes and clothes wrapped in plastic above our heads and shoes and shoes on the floor as far as I can see. You close the doors behind us and we are alone. This closet is different than yours—it smells of mold and leather and the long blue dress that I love is not here. I can see you listening, your ear against the door, but you do not tell me what your parents are saying. I feel the ground creak and see shadows pass

beneath the door and your chest stops moving as you hold your breath. We are still and the shadows go away. I smooth your hair the way Momma does when I have a bad dream, but you take my hand away. Be still, you sign, be still.

Then, one day, you run away. You leave the mountains, you leave me. But before, you take me to your room where you pack your clothes, your sparkly things, you take your jacket, but the peacock—you leave that for me. I offer you the blanket, the one you gave me. You will need it, I sign, out there in the snow. You hug me then, holding me close for what seems like a long time. Your clothes feel flimsy and I can feel the bones of your back. You are warm and I can feel your breaths against my ear as they go in and out.

At night when the moon is out, I watch your window, but it is dark, and I know that you are gone. My parents go to bed, but I do not sleep. I smell smoke from the chimneys along the street and I wonder if you can smell it, too, wherever you are, whether you are in the forest or on one of the curvy roads that go down the mountains. I hold the peacock costume to my face and smell you, a musky scent of fire, cinnamon, and skin.

When the police come, I do not tell them where you went, because I do not know. I do not know, I sign to them, I do not know, I do not know. But I do know you are safe, safer than in the closet in a room with boxes and boxes and shoes. The police write notes on clipboards and your mother gives them a picture of you. In the picture, you are in your jacket in the snow. There are trees behind you, their branches covered in white and you are smiling. Your eyes are squinting in the sun.

They never find you and me and my parents leave the mountains, too. It is morning and I look for you on the roads as we drive away. It is snowing and I feel the ice crackle under the car as we drive down the roads that have not been plowed. There is fog and I can barely see the trees. I look behind us as we drive down the mountains, our tracks fading in the snow and I wonder if the snow was like this the night you left home, if it was light, soft, and covered everything.

