

Daddy's Teeth

by Tawnysha Greene

At night, I wake up, and Daddy's in the bathroom with a hanger in his mouth. Momma stands beside him, puts a hand on his cheek, his head, prays for healing, but he bats her hand away, tells her she's hurting him more. I watch Daddy pull, eyes closed, spit, pull again. Blood on him, the sink, the floor.

He spins around, pushes past her to the kitchen, pulls out the knife drawer, picks the long skinny knife we use for cutting meat, and saws two teeth loose. Closing his eyes, he hunches over the sink, holds one tooth in his hand, the broken half of another, rolls them across his palm, then feels in his mouth for what is left.

Momma cleans up the mess, and I give Daddy paper towels, ice as he sits down, spits blood in a pot.

"Sometimes, we have to be our own doctors," says Daddy, his voice garbled by soggy red towels. His breath smells like wet pennies.

I think of when Daddy had an accident in the garage in the house we lived in before we came here, a saw missing the mark, cutting his thumb through. The skin and muscles were gone, but the bone was still there, I knew, because he showed me before he poured alcohol over it, bound it tight with ripped sheets Momma cut from the linen closet. I think of when he cut his head open, a wrench snapping loose when he fixed a pipe under the house, a towel held to his head until the bleeding slowed. When the blood still seeped through band-aids, a piece of duct tape held his skin together, leaving only a jagged scar when he pulled it off. He had said the same thing then.

I watch Momma as she washes Daddy's teeth and sets them on the counter. I pick them up. They're chipped, black grooves on the side, but the teeth are large, flat, much bigger than mine. Momma's whispering under her breath, closing her eyes when she dries her hands. She's praying, her lips forming the same words over and over again.

She goes to Daddy, empties his pot in the sink, brings it back, and they lay together on the floor, him up on one elbow, leaned over. She mirrors him, except with a hand she brings to his head then down his arm where his burn scar is, then repeats the same motion until Daddy is still. She doesn't say anything as she does this, but moves her hand gently, so that it barely touches him, but does, and he doesn't push her away.

