

Momma's Prayers

by Tawnysha Greene

When Daddy gets an infection in his teeth, he sips hot salt water, swishes, spits out blood. Momma puts her hands on his cheek, his head, prays for healing, but he bats her hand, tells her she's hurting him more.

One night, I wake and Daddy's in the bathroom with a hanger in his mouth. Momma's crying and I stand behind her, watch Daddy pull, eyes closed, spit, pull again. Blood on him, the sink, the floor.

He spins around, pushes past us to the kitchen, pulls out the knife drawer, picks the long skinny one we use to carve chicken, saws until a piece falls free. Daddy sits on the floor, looks at it, turns it around and around in his hand.

While Momma cleans up the mess, I give Daddy paper towels, ice as he spits blood in a pot. *We have to be our own doctors*, says Daddy, his voice garbled by soggy red towels. His breath smells like wet pennies.

Momma puts the tooth bit in a small, plastic bag, closes her eyes, prays for the bleeding to stop, for the infection to go away, says God is teaching us. *These are good things*, she says, *they cleanse us, make us strong*.

Daddy's in the garage when he saws his thumb through, binds what's left to his hand with tape, a ripped sheet. A month later when sister falls, hits her head, cuts it open, Momma holds ice to her face, doesn't let her sleep until the concussion is gone.

But when Daddy's gone on a trip, Momma gets sick, stays in bed. Her skin burns, her clothes soaked through and she asks for more blankets, says she's cold. *Blood poisoning*, she says. She had it once

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as a child and tells me to pray.

She sleeps for a week, talks to God in dreams. Sister and me take turns with her in bed, watch her breathe. At night, Momma reaches for us, mumbles things we don't understand, then says, *Jesus, Jesus*.

We aren't allowed to use the phone, but we try to call Daddy, turn the big white dial on the phone like we had seen Daddy do, but there is no answer. We shake Momma awake. *Let's get a doctor*, we say.

But she squeezes my arm, her grip strong, says, *no*, falls back asleep and I cannot wake her again. I take our pennies we keep in a big blue bottle on the dresser, the emergency money Momma keeps in her underwear drawer.

Sister pulls at me, follows me to the neighbors, screams, *Momma said no*. I pretend I don't hear, knock on the door, tell them we need to go to the hospital and they take Momma away.

