

Queens and Kings

by Tawnysha Greene

At church on Sunday, we go to a new classroom, one where the seven- and eight-year-olds are, and my sister wears her hair up like she had seen my cousin and I do. Before we go, Momma curls her bangs, lets her use the lotion she keeps in a blue container on the sink, and helps her spread it on her face until her skin is soft and smells sweet like Momma's. She's shy and holds my hand, and as Momma talks to our new teacher, a lady with black hair, I look across the hall to the room where the nine- and ten-year-olds are--where my cousin goes--and I watch those inside, singing to the praise and worship songs a man sings while he strums his guitar.

We watch a movie. It's about Esther, a story we know, Momma having told it to us many times, but the movie is different from the story Momma gives. The king's hair is long, and he wears a robe that looks like gold and lives in a house with curtains for walls that billow with the wind in every scene. The streets in the city are dirty, full of people carrying baskets of straw, and the houses are dusty, bleached with sun.

The scene I remember most isn't in Momma's story at all. A man leads girl in a white dress up stone steps to an altar where he presents her to a crowd then covers her face in a white shroud. He lifts her, lays her down on the altar, then pulls out a blade, holds it high, before he brings it down. The scene replays in my head through the rest of the movie, the man's hands on the hilt, the sun's glint on the blade, and the blood that I know will come after, but that I never see.

My sister's thinking of it, too, and when Momma picks us up, my sister holds her hands together, wrings each finger, one at a time, the way she does when her mind is on other things. It's the first movie we've watched without Momma watching it before, choosing the parts to fast-forward, and for us to turn away. I hold my sister's hand, and she stops the wringing. We are almost down the hallway when she looks up at Momma, asks why the girl died.

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I squeeze her hand, but she pulls it free and makes a motion for Momma of the man who killed the girl, the way he held the knife high over his head and thrust it down.

Momma kneels, holds my sister's hands in hers, and looks to me. "What movie did you watch?"

I tell her it's about Esther, the queen who saves her people, and Momma takes us back to the room where we were. The kids are gone now, and the teacher is turning off the lights, and Momma asks to see the movie, the one we watched today.

She gives it to her, and Momma looks at the cover, the pictures along the back, the rating of NR at the bottom. The teacher says it's a Christian movie, but Momma doesn't stay, leaves the movie, the room, and goes to the car.

We never go back, but go to the sanctuary instead with Momma, sit next to her, our Bibles open as the pastor talks to us of the kings of Israel, of Saul, David, and Absalom. I underline the passages Momma does in her Bible and circle the same words she does, of the oil Samuel uses to anoint David, the stone David chooses when he slays Goliath, the branches of an oak tree that entangle Absalom's hair, and the three spears of Joab that fly through the heart of a king.

