

The Game

by Tawnysha Greene

Momma pulls back our bed covers, grabs hold of our nightgowns, and pulls me and my sister into the hallway. Momma's in her pajamas, too, and I stumble against the light and Momma's feet in front of mine. All the lights in the house are on.

I hear noise even though I'm hard of hearing, dull thuds that sound at the other end of the house. I look back, but Momma jerks me forward, tells me to hurry.

We go to the only place that's still dark. The bathroom at the end of the hallway, the small one where there's a window and the shower curtain is lace, not plastic like it is in the bigger one. She pulls us inside and shuts the door behind us, locks it, and keeps the light off.

She smiles at us and puts a hand to her lips, like she's told us a secret. Motioning to the towels, Momma pulls them off the rack and sets them in the tub, makes us climb in, and she drapes more on top of us. I feel the thuds again, only in the sides of the tub, and my sister feels them, too. She's completely deaf, but the vibrations in the house are ones we all sense and know.

Momma signs to us.

"We're practicing," she signs, "for an earthquake." Her sign for the last word is big as she makes the word for earth, then clenches both hands into fists and beats the air in front of her.

Light comes in from underneath the door behind her, and we can see that her face is animated, her eyes big, and my sister laughs. I want to laugh, too, but I am distracted by Momma's fists in the air, her small, pale knuckles, because I think of the other fists at the end of the house where our earthquake is, where Daddy is.

Momma gets in the tub, and pulls the lace shower curtain closed, and it's even darker than it was before. She sits down between us, and we lean on her as she puts her arms around us. She continues to sign, her hands farther apart, shadows now against the

muted lights from the underneath the doorway, but we can still see what she says.

"If we hide in the tub," she signs, "it will keep us safe if the walls come down."

I remember the lessons from the library book we got not long ago. The book's cover was worn and some of the pages were missing, but she read it to us during school time, told stories about fires, storms, and safety.

I don't tell her that she's wrong about the earthquakes, and that hiding in the tub was only for tornadoes. I don't want her hands to stop, because she doesn't sign to us a lot anymore, instead talks to us with her mouth instead, like Daddy does.

We lie against her and try to fall asleep as she signs above us. She tells us how to hide if the earthquake lasts a long time, what to do if the house falls down around us.

