

Tongues

by Tawnysha Greene

When we go to the park, Daddy and Momma talk on the picnic bench, but I can only guess at what they say as Momma nods, pets Daddy's arm, looks away, then looks to him again. My cousin comes, too, and we stay on the playground, make up rules for an obstacle course for a race we will run--swing from the monkey bars, run across the moving bridge, go down the slide, and back to touch the safe point. We don't have watches to time each other, so we count aloud, and my cousin is always fastest, able to swing across the bars two at a time and run down the slide instead of sitting down. When she wins, she puts her hands up in the air, bows, and sticks her tongue out at us, bright and pink.

It's funny when she does it, and we do it, too, laugh, do it again, and I hear Daddy call. I look to the picnic bench, but he's not there. He's at the edge of the playground. He'd been watching us the whole time, and I put a hand on my sister, and she looks, too.

He goes to the car, and Momma follows, motions for all of us to come, too, and we ride back home in quiet. Daddy looks at us in the rearview mirror, looks away, breathes hard, and although it's hot in the car, gooseflesh rushes up and down my arms. My cousin touches me, whispers. "Are you in trouble?"

I mouth my words back, so Daddy won't hear. "I don't know."

We pull in the driveway, and Daddy shuts off the car, and we all get out, walk to the stairs to the room where we live above Daddy's sister's garage. My cousin goes to her porch, and I can feel her eyes watching us as we climb the stairs. I hear her voice, hard, unlike anything I've heard from her before.

"They didn't do anything."

Daddy turns around, breath catching, and I climb up the stairs faster.

"They did nothing wrong," she says, and her voice is controlled, and although I can't see her, I know how she's standing, hands on her hips, eyes up at Daddy.

Daddy lurches down the stairs, and Momma calls after him. My cousin doesn't move.

"This is none of your business," he hisses, and when I look, he's pointing to her, his hand inches from her face. "You know nothing."

He pauses between each word, his voice down to a growl, and I go inside, don't watch her leave, don't watch as Daddy comes up the stairs again.

We know what's coming next, and my sister and I wait at the end of the room, our backs to the walls and wait for him to pick who's he'll punish first. My sister wrings her hands, steps from one foot to another, breathes through her nose as she watches Daddy stop at the door, cross to the bed and sit. He calls us over.

"Get in a line," he says, and we do. My sister's in front, Daddy's looking at the floor, then looks up at her.

It scares me when he's like this, when he tries to hold himself back, and I watch for the stillness, the clenching of his fists, the closing of the eyes before he breaks, something I know he'll do.

"Do it again," he says.

My sister knows, too, and starts to cry, backs up against me.

"No, Daddy," she says. "I don't want to."

It's hard to understand her, because she's crying hard now, words blurred, as she draws herself in, hands to her chest, hunched over.

"I said," he says, and his voice is hard. "Do it again."

I'm shaking now, and I watch my sister take another step back, straighten, and hold her breath, her chest still hitching. Her face is red, and she looks to him. Daddy's face hasn't changed, and I watch the muscles of his forearms twitch, his fists grow tighter, so that parts of his hands are white.

She takes a breath, holds it again, then her tongue slides out, slowly as she looks to Daddy, and he springs free.

In an instant, she's on the floor on her back, and Daddy's on top of her, holding her down. She's screaming, and Daddy puts a hand over her face, his hand covering her forehead, her nose, and her eyes. He takes his other hand, puts it in her mouth. She chokes, and he brings her tongue out, and with the hand that held her face down, makes a

fist, hits her chin, then again, and again until she closes her eyes, bites her tongue through.

Blood is everywhere now, on her, on him, the floor, and he turns to me.

He pushes me down, and we're both on the floor. He's on top of my chest, and I can't breathe. I feel his hand on my face, feel it brush past my lips, and I taste my sister's blood.

"Do it," he says, and I can't see his face. Mine is covered by his hand, and I only see darkness.

I obey, but turn my head when he rams my jaw open, when he pulls my tongue past my teeth, turn it more when I know he will hit me, hit me as he did my sister, and it works. My back teeth bite down, the ones I know won't cut as bad, and I hear my tongue crunch between my teeth, feel my mouth fill, become hot as the blood comes.

I don't move when he gets up, don't look to my sister who is heaving on her hands and knees now, throwing up blood on the floor. She's crying between heaves, and Daddy kneels next to her. I can see his feet and her lurching body at the edge of my vision.

"Dry up," he says, then slaps her head, says it again, and she leans back on her knees, head bowed as she holds her bloody hands to her mouth, fights her body to keep still.

I don't want to watch, but I do, and Momma picks us up, takes us to the bathroom where she washes our clothes and holds ice to our mouths. She closes the door, but I can hear Daddy turn on the TV and watch the news stories, because he plays them loud.

My sister's stopped crying and as Momma washes our faces, checks our mouths to see if they've stopped bleeding, my sister shows her where part of her tongue's been cut off, jagged where a piece is missing. Momma puts the ice back on, gives her a washcloth to put in her mouth, too, and we sit on the floor, wait for the bleeding to slow.

Momma pets our arms, holds my sister in her lap, rocks as she hums one of the worship songs from church.

"Your daddy still loves you, baby," she says, but neither of us say we know.

My sister doesn't move as Momma continues to rock her, and I get close to her face, and she looks. "I'm sorry," I say. I don't care if Momma hears.

My sister furrows her eyebrows, tries to say something, but the ice, the bloody cloth is in the way.

"I should have gone first."

