

We're pleased to welcome Toiya Kristen Finley to TOTU, and glad for the chance to publish this mature story.

Shrimp Kabobs and Screaming Sleep

by Toiya Kristen Finley

Splainin why I was late to Mama—that's what we called our grandmama—wouldn't be easy. Shoulda been home by now with those suckers' numbers and her money. You'd be slow too in this heat. I took a long drink of water and let a little dribble on to my cheeks and chin and then rechecked the list. Bentley, Boswell, Jackson, Miller, Stevens, Vaughn with their handpicked lucky lottos written in the grids next to their names. I got everybody round the neighborhood, those who didn't show up on Mama's front porch.

My cousin CF was locked up in his room like always, faint R&B slippin beneath his door. It was a bad contrast with the blues Daddy—that's what we call our granddaddy—let wail all through the house.

"Mama why don't you turn the air on in here?" I yelled to the den. The men playin poker in the living room looked up at me.

"Did you get em? You oughtta after all that time you took." She came and yanked the book from my hand.

"Yeah, I got em. I already been meltin out there. I don't need to be meltin in here neither."

"Are you payin the bills, Malik?" She's a little woman, my grandmama, but solid, and even though I got a good 7 inches on her, her pupils darkened deeper shades of coal. I wasn't stupid. I'd sweat instead of gettin smacked.

Mama opened the ledger, checked the page with today's date, and traced her finger down the entries. "Malik, where's Mr. Jensen?"

I shrugged and was careful not to roll my eyes—I didn't want em knocked back into my head. "I don't know no Mr. Jensen. You didn't tell me bout no Mr. Jensen."

"Don't be fresh with your grandmother, boy," one of the men said from the poker game.

"He's a new customer," Mama said. "I told you the address was on the kitchen counter. Now, go get it where

I left it for you, and get me his picks."

This Jensen cat lived past the projects, 3 blocks over from my grandparents' house. I hated walkin past the projects cuz there're always a couple of kids who recognize me from school, want to hang out and do somethin stupid like smoke up on the curb where the police can see em or spend the afternoon cruisin to different liquor stores, lookin for people to buy em rum and Schnapps and brandy and forties. Come nighttime they'd have a nice little arsenal for a 2 or 3 man party. But really, if those were the only ways you knew how to waste your Saturday, you weren't worth it. A couple of them called out to me, and I waved without lookin.

Jensen lived down a slopin hill hidden from the street, and drivers and neighbors left him all kinds of presents in his yard—beer bottles, crushed orange juice and milk cartons, gum wrappers, used condoms. Jensen didn't seem too in a hurry to clean it up. Some of this had to have been here for years, buried halfway in the dirt, the paper all torn and mashed by rain. But Mama said he was some kinda crazy Vietnam vet, and he probably kept himself cooped up in that house. The house wasn't nothin neither, a little Lego block made of faint green brick. The cold metal door hurt my knuckles when I knocked.

"It's open. Come right on in."

So I did, and the front room was dark, a dingy lamp with a red shade the only thing providin light. Milk crates servin for coffee tables with bills draped all over em. A bookcase with two of the shelves fallin down so the books almost spilled out. Nothin else in the room except a mid-sized aquarium and the dronin hum of its motor. A bulky figure waded along the bottom of the tank.

"You must be here to get my lotto numbers."

Hadn't even seen him comin. The inside of my body

quivered, but I wasn't gonna let him know that. "Oh, yeah. Yessir."

His slits for eyes were set deep under his forehead, and with hardly any light in the room, they looked like they had no whites. He sported one of those Fidel Castro beards, bushy from ear to ear, and when he spoke, a big tuft of kinky hair moved, no mouth to be seen. Jensen scratched his grimy white undershirt.

"What kinda fish is that?" I nodded towards the tank.

"Shark."

"A shark?" Aquarium sharks were wispy little things. This one was almost as large as the tank. "But it's so big."

"Oh, they'll get as big as their surroundings."

I folded my arms. "Then why not get a bigger tank, man?"

"Cuz they get as big as their surroundings." He smiled, and the tuft of kinky hair spread. "Well, make yourself at home, young fella. I gotta think about these numbers here. Just can't play anything if I'm going to have a chance. You thirsty?"

"Yessir, I am." Wasn't nothin like Nashville heat, humidity on top of heat, on top of humidity. He gave me something pink, and when it hit my tongue, I was thrilled to taste strawberry soda. Nobody knows how to make it no more. It's either too much like medicine or too syrupy, but this was the balance—a little tart biting at the taste buds but a strong essence of strawberries. I checked for the label, but it had been removed.

"What grade are you in, son?" he called from the back.

Now, I didn't want this fool to small talk me while he took his precious time. Nobody needed to take that long figurin out his picks cuz honestly, none of these turkeys ever won money, and if they did, they blew it all the next day tryin to get lucky again. "I'm far enough along where people don't ask me what grade I'm in."

Jensen chuckled. "You a senior?"

"Yeah, I'm a senior."

"Twenty year-old senior?"

I took another swallow, and the cold burned my throat.

"I'm just kidding you, son. You must be good with numbers, keeping your grandmother's books. Is math your subject?"

"I do alright," I said. The shark fluttered at the bottom of the tank.

"Don't tell me you're one of those kids who limits himself. Don't live up to your potential just to show you're cool, or do you call it 'street cred' these days?"

I sucked my teeth, but not loud enough for him to hear. You couldn't argue with old cats. They'd "lived

longer" and always knew more than you, wouldn't understand—even if you told em your cousin locked himself up in his room to write sissy poetry cuz of lack of "street cred"—even if you said you'd take a C or a D over an A cuz you didn't want to get punked out in the locker room once the class discovered your trig scores.

"Why don't you come back here, young man?"

The next room was nothin but green tiles, those sick green tiles found in surgery wards, and the wall was stark white. He had some plants with long leaves sittin under UV lamps on both sides of the room, but I didn't see Jensen. There was a dark hallway connectin this room to the next, but no sign of the man. No sign of anything lived in—a bedroom, kitchen, den. Nothin.

"I told you you could come on back here," he said.

Wasn't no place left for me to go cept for that little hallway. I took another swig of soda and expected to find Jensen, but the room was wall-to-wall fish tanks, no other ways in or out. Bubbles and fish swirlin everywhere, and I was so close water splashed on my face and clothes. I hated bein close to fish tanks cuz when they were in the stores, all the fish were sick or dead and sucked into the pumps, glassy-eyed and bobbin with their mouths wide open. I always felt like the fish would jump out of the tanks to be rid of all of the disease or potential human owners—or just to be free—landin on the floor somewhere and floppin around. I watch my step around those parts of the stores, don't want soft fish bodies explodin like packs of ketchup under my shoes, get fish guts on my soles.

Jensen's fish were wild, zippin in the water, their vibrant colors crossin the spectrum. They couldn't have been legal, all of these fish. I'd never seen anything like em. In one of the tanks stacked higher up the wall, a fish with somethin like fur prowled the bottom of the tank and sucked up every goldfish that came in its path. In another, blood red fish with black-tipped fins flocked to the front of the aquarium to stare at me. A tag on the glass marked them as "DESPHORO." But I almost screamed, almost fell back and hit my head when I saw a line of fish jumpin from tank to tank. There were about six of them, slimy pink and shaped like shrimp. A thin stick impaled all of them, a shish kabob. All of a sudden, I lost my breath, and I thought my legs might collapse under me. "What the..." I tried to say.

"Those are Screaming Kell," Jensen said. I didn't know when he came in, and I didn't turn to look at him. "Pretty active little guys. Good thing the other fish don't mind having them in their tanks."

"Come on, man. Where'd you get all these? This can't be legal. Where'd the hell they come from? How the hell can they live?"