

Tara White

By Meredith Sue Willis

If my plan works, then I won't ever tell this story again, unless I decide to help other runaways someday. The main thing right now is to take all the bad things in my memory and squash them under the sewer cover lids. Then I'm going to stomp those lids down and forget. If the plan doesn't work, I'll come up with another one. That's the kind of person I am.

T-Rex took me home with him, which was the first step in the plan. We slipped out of Pinco's so-called studio and ran and changed directions and ran again, and then caught the bus to T-Rex's. It's near the river, not such a great neighborhood, but I've lived in worse, and their apartment is decorated very nice. I've lived in Charleston, West Virginia, and Parkersburg and Huntington and Cincinnati, too, and also out in the country, but my mother said it was too spooky. She always wanted to own a place, but she never did, at least not when I knew her, and I've been gone for almost a year.

Overall, I like smaller places for the grass, but I like bigger places for quick getaways like what T-Rex and I did. Pinco's so-called studio is in this warehouse that his father left him. He has rooms for us to sleep in upstairs, and he makes his so-called films in the big space downstairs. I needed T-Rex mostly to have a place to go to. That was the first part of my plan, and that part has gone okay.

I met T-Rex because Pinco hired him and some of his homeys to come in and, you know, be in the films with us. Us being the runaways that Rafi brings to work for Pinco, but it's working, so-called, too, because when we got paid, we had to give it all back to Pinco for room and board. He gave cash to T-Rex and his friends. They thought it was a big joke to be paid to do what is the only thing on their mind anyhow, what a bunch of jerks, but T-Rex was okay. He was kind of sweet, and younger than he looked, and on our break we talked for a while, and I decided he was the one for my plan.

It's not that Pinco beat us or drugged us or anything. And I had noticed that after a couple of weeks, most of the girls left one way or the other. I mean, except for the warehouse being in the middle of nowhere, there was nothing to stop us from going, only now I know if I don't have a plan, I'll end up at another place like Pinco's or worse. Another reason I chose T-Rex was because of how he talked about his mother and his big sister who is on a scholarship to nursing school, and his brother in the Marines. I liked the sound of his family.

I ran off from my mother and her boyfriends especially old ugly bristle-nose

Sherwood. I went off with this man I met named Craig who said he loved me, and it was nice for about one week, and then we moved in with two friends of his, and so then I was living with him and these two other guys, and you can guess how that went as soon as they started drinking, so I ran away from Craig and them, which was when I met Rafael.

It was late when we got to T-Rex's house. He lives with his mother in an apartment on the second floor front of a three story house. His mother was at work, he told me, she was an aide on the night shift at the hospital. The living room was all beige with lots of miniature animal statues, but I liked his mother's bedroom best. The bed was almost as big as the whole room, red satin with white net ruffles. All in all, I thought it would be a very nice place to live, a little crowded for three people, but I'd keep it neat. He said he slept on the couch, so that's where we lay down, and my first plan was not to go to sleep, because it was almost morning, but to wait till time for her to come in, and then have a nice breakfast of eggs and toast or even biscuits if there was any Bisquik in the house. I wanted her to come in and smell nice things cooking and have a favorable impression and know right away that I am good for something. And then, the way I figured it, all I had to do was be patient the way I am with animals, not that his mother was an animal, but people take patience too, and I would just be helpful around the house, and my plan was, she would let me join the family.

Unfortunately, we fell asleep, and I woke up to the sound of the key turning in the door, and it was broad daylight, and at first I didn't remember where I was and who was this strange woman wearing hospital scrubs with a balloon print and me naked on the couch wrapped in a sheet. T-Rex jumped up- at least he had on his boxers and tee shirt- and started jiggling on his bare feet like he had to go to the bathroom, and she started yelling at the top of her lungs

"What is that?" she screamed. "What do you think you're doing bringing that into my house?" I'm very good at blocking out screaming, and also at blocking out words that I don't need to hear. For instance, I didn't need to hear her yell that T-Rex had a naked girl on the couch. I knew that. I didn't need to hear what she called me either, which was some pretty ugly things, but I just blocked them out. It wasn't like we did anything on her precious couch, we put in a hard day yesterday at that and even T-Rex was tired by the time we got back. And I was the one who had made sure that he put sheets on the couch to protect it from our dirty feet. She was roundish, and not too tall, a lot shorter than T-Rex, but it didn't matter, he just cringed.

She must have screamed for five minutes straight before she even put down her pocketbook. Then she planted her hands on her hips and yelled some more. I thought how working in a hospital is better than, say, waitressing. Like my

mother. Gradually, I started to hear more of what she said: I work hard for a living, and look how you pay me back! And, Life is hard enough without this and fingers to the bone and the shirt off my back. But you have to start paying attention when the volume goes down and they take a breath and their eyes flicker over toward you.

Her voice finally changed from rageful to sad. "You brought home the trash," she said.

"Now Mama—" says T-Rex.

"Don't you 'Now Mama' me. Don't you say a word till I ask you!" He was still bouncing. "Where'd she come from? Where'd you get her?"

"Oh, she just came along," he said, and I didn't like that, he was forgetting the plan, talking about me like I was some kind of stray dog trailing after him.

"Well you can just get her out of here," said his mother. "I mean it. I'm going in the bedroom and lie down and prop my feet up, and when I come out, she's going to be gone, do you hear me? She's going to be gone, and you're going to be at school."

This was better than, say, if she had dragged me out naked. I caught T-Rex's eye, and his face got all scrunchy.

"Mama," he whined, "She's my friend. Her name is Taliyah, Mama, like Taliyah."

"A white girl name Taliyah? I don't think so." Taliyah was the name of T-Rex's older sister in nursing school on a scholarship. "What's your real name, girl?" she asked me, and she caught me off guard, looking at me so suddenly.

But T-Rex came through. "Why not Taliyah?" he said. "Taliyah's a great name!"

"Because there's no white Taliyah," said his mother. "What are you doing here, girl? Where is your family?"

I said, "I didn't have a place to stay last night, so T-Rex invited me. I'm very sorry to be upsetting you."

Which started a whole other thing: "T-Rex?" said his mother. "T-Rex? Who's that? Who's that dinosaur? This is Taroq Isaac Holmes, and my son don't have no street name!"

I liked Taroq for a name better anyhow. I said, "You gave nice names to your children."

Mrs. Holmes stopped yelling. She crossed her arms over her chest. "You like the names I give my children, do you?"

She's smart, I thought, but she doesn't know about the coincidence, which was that I had already picked out Taliyah for a name before I heard of T-Rex's I mean Taroq's sister. And I'll never tell her what they called me at home.

I said, "My name is Taliyah White." She lifted up her hands, palms out. "I

don't care if your name is the Queen of England, I want you out of my house. I'm looking at you and I see trouble six ways from Sunday. Taroq, I'm going in my room, and I'm taking off my shoes, and I'm going to take a rest. You put away those groceries, and tell her to put her clothes on, and when I come out, I want her gone, and I want you at school, do you hear me, Taroq?"

"Yes ma'am," he said.

And she went down the hall to the bathroom, and we stayed where we were till we heard her come back down the hall and say, "I mean it!" Then she went to her room and closed the door. We could hear her moving around a little bit, and then she stopped making noise.

I said, "Doesn't she eat dinner?" Taroq sat down on the chair and looked grouchy. "Sometimes. I don't know. Usually she doesn't go straight to bed. Usually she makes me breakfast and then I go to school."

"Well then," I said, "Let's keep on schedule. You go take your shower or whatever and get ready for school- "

"School!"

"I heard her say you were supposed to go to school. It's a school day isn't it?"

"What about you?"

"I'll take care of me," I said. "If you think you're in trouble now, think what she'll do to you if you skip school too. Again."

He thought about that. She didn't know that for the last week he'd been skipping school to come to Pinco's to make a few dollars doing the sex movie. He looked at me, wondering what the chances were I was going to tell her.

I said, "I'm going to make you some breakfast and get you off to school, and then, if it's all right, I'll take a shower too before I leave."

Taroq pulled his brows down over his face and balled up his lips. He really looked like a fat old brown baby when he did that. "Okay," he said. "You'll leave?" And then his face relaxed. "You make yourself some breakfast too."

"I will," I said. "And thank you for getting me away from Pinco's." That was all it took to convince him.

"Yeah, I got you out of there pretty good, didn't I?"

So he showered and got dressed, and he ate six eggs, I couldn't believe it, and toast and milk. When he was ready to leave, he said, "Where are you going to go?"

"I have a plan," I said. "It's all right."

And after he had gone, I cleaned up the kitchen, and I took my shower, and washed out my underpants and hung them in the sun from the window to dry, and then I went up to that closed sliding door that separated her room from the living room and listened and didn't hear anything, so I made up a batter for French toast and I got the coffee maker ready to run. I had margarine sitting in a pan on the stove, and I set her a place at the table. I figured she would probably

tell me I had to be like a sister to Taroq and no more sex, well, believe me, I could take a rest from that.

The problem would be Taroq. Taroq had really thought it was cool to be in Pinco's so-called *Magnum 38 Opus The New Integration: Black and White Together in Living Color*. Pinco put the "in living color" into his title because he was afraid somebody might think it was in black and white.

I took a damp dishrag and cleaned all the little elephants and dolphins on the shelves in the living room. I really got into the nooks and crannies of those statues, and after I finished the living room, I went in the kitchen and took the knobs off the stove and scrubbed those. The harder I scrubbed, the more I felt like I was scrubbing off all the old dead dirty skin on me. I washed my hair too. There had been an African-American girl at Pinco's who decided she was going to make me corn rows, and she said it was a challenge because of how slippery white hair is, but when it was finished everyone agreed it looked good, and it was all my own hair. But then here came Pinco throwing a fit because he said nobody wanted to see no little wigger girl in his films, the people want to see flat hair like sheets and curtains and the blonder the better. Pinco really is a wigger, all fat and pink and pretending to be one eighth black from New Orleans or something like that.

Well, ugly things were starting to pop up in my brain again. I think once I'm in a family they won't bother me so much, I won't think about stinky pinky Pinco or Rafael Catcher or Craig who expected me to do his friends. Or Sherwood with pig bristles in his nose.

I looked at some magazines, and then I looked at her Bible on the coffee table. She had marked it up with yellow highlighter. I was surprised you were allowed to do that. I took it with me into the kitchen and sat down at the table and wondered how long she was going to sleep. All I had to do was convince her. I would get a job, and at first I'd give her all the money, but when I had a little for myself I'd get a nice hairstyle with the cornrows and then the rest of it hanging loose, simple and clean.

I had hoped his mother wouldn't be so much like Oh she's white we don't want no white girls in our house. If she's a Christian like he said, she ought not to pay so much attention to race. I had to keep in mind she had been shocked to find her son here with a naked girl. I wished I could say I was pregnant with Taroq's baby. That actually sounded good, a little baby, the color of maple chewy candies.

One thing about old Pinco, though, was that he kept birth control pills and condoms around, and he made everybody wash a lot. He said he didn't want anyone getting STD's.

When I finally heard Mrs. Holmes stirring, I pushed the button on the coffee maker, and I started the French toast. Just as I'd turned the first two slices, I

heard her coming, and I sat back down with the Bible open in front of me. She was wearing a really pretty robe with puffy sleeves and bright colors and ribbon ties.

She stopped in the doorway. "What are you doing with my Bible? Why are you still here?"

I jumped right up. "It'll be ready in just two seconds. I looked all over and couldn't find syrup, but you had molasses, so I made sugar syrup with a little bit of molasses for color and you know flavor."

"Where's Taroq?"

"Taroq went to school, like you said. He wasn't going to, but I made him."

"You made him. You were supposed to leave. And now you're here and he's not."

"Yes Ma'am, Mrs. Holmes. I decided I had to wait till you got up and—apologize." Well, this part wasn't quite honest, but I had to keep her talking to me. "I wanted to apologize for, you know, upsetting you last night. And also Taroq told me to stay till he got back from school."

She made a tooth sucking sound.

I said, "I wanted to do something to say, you know, to say I'm sorry, and thank you. Before I leave. It's my special French toast. I sure hope you like French toast."

She finally came all the way into the kitchen in that pretty flowery thing with the puffy sleeves. She touched the plate and napkin and all I had laid out for her. "Where do you come from?" she asked. "You aren't from up here."

It was going really well so far. If she just liked the French toast, I knew everything would be okay. "I make it with cinnamon instead of nutmeg," I said.

"You're from down south somewhere, aren't you? How old?"

"Eighteen," I said, and she snorted. I said, "Now you sit down, I want you to try my French toast. How many do you think you can eat?" She let me serve her. I had to use a Pyrex measuring cup for the syrup, but I'd found a pretty dish for the margarine.

Mrs. Holmes put her hands in her lap, and she bowed her head and prayed silently, moving her lips a little. And then, she looked at the nice crusty brown french toast slices on the plate in front of her and the syrup and the margarine, and she said, "You know you can't stay."

I hoped it wasn't Jesus told her that. But I wasn't going to be discouraged, I was going to be the opposite of discouraged. I watched her eat. Her skin was just the same color as Taroq's, which was like polished furniture. Her eyes were darker than Taroq's. If I had sat at the table with my mother this long staring at her, she would have started in with What? Why are you staring at me like that? And when I was small, she might have slapped me too.

"I'm a Christian woman," said Mrs. Holmes.

"Are you ready for some more French toast?" I was half expecting her to say no, but she sighed.

"One more. Are you listening to me, girl?"

"Yes ma'am," I said.

"I am a Christian woman, but my pastor is far more godly than I'll ever be, she says we must Forgive, and that to forgive is to forget, and she herself was set upon by dogs and beaten by the police. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

I flipped the French toast. "Yes, ma'am."

She made a face and seemed exasperated. "You say yes ma'am a lot. Where is your mother, girl? Where are your people? Are the police looking for you? I already see how this is going to go, some police are going to come breaking in here saying somebody kidnapped you and I'm telling you now I don't want to have to deal with that."

I said, "No police, Mrs. Holmes. You don't know. My mother was not exactly a good mother- "

"Don't disrespect your mother, girl."

I was beginning to get a little irked too that she was calling me girl. I said, "You don't know my mother. And my name is Taliyah. You don't know my mother, and you don't know what it was like living with a bunch of crystal meth freaks. And her boyfriend. He was always after me. It's the truth," I said. How do you make people know when you're really telling the true truth? "I'm not even saying all of it because I don't think about all of it. I close the lid and stomp on it."

She started looking at me again, and finally shook her head. "Tara," she said. "I would call you Tara, but not Taliyah."

She was giving me a name. It went through me as warm as if I was peeing myself which I haven't done since I was twelve. I was too big to do it, but I used to have these dreams where things chased me and chased me, and then finally I would get to a safe room and relax, and then the warmth flooded out, and well, you know. "Tara's a nice name."

"Tara," she said. "I believe you, that you have your troubles too, but I'm not taking in a young white girl. This is not for me. I have too much to take care of."

"I cook and clean," I said. "Whatever got done at my mother's, I did it."

"Now," she said. "I want to know about you and Taroq. I want to know- you're not carrying his child are you?"

"No, no baby."

"At least you don't have that over him." That was when I realized that she wasn't really interested in me, just her son. It made me feel sad, but it also showed me what I had to do.

I said, "Do you want to know how I met him? Because you won't like it."

Closed her eyes and prayed a little more, and then opened them. "Tell it," she said.

"My mother was into meth, and Sherwood was after me, and I ran away—"

"Like so many before you," she said. "I'm not saying white people don't have problems."

I said, "It went from bad to worse, Craig this guy I ran off with, well, he tricked me, and Rafael sold me," I thought that might get a rise out of her, but she just waited. "And I ended up with this man with a warehouse over near the water, and he was into exploiting young girls, black and white and whatever he could find. Making movies."

"Jesus, Jesus," she said, very softly, and crossed her arms under her bosom and began to rock a little bit. "Oh Jesus what a world this is!"

"And that's where I met Taroq, only he called himself T-Rex."

"At that movie place?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Somebody dragged him over there?"

"No ma'am. He did it for money."

"Jesus Lord! I don't believe you!" She stood up, she moved at me, and I know when there's a slap coming, and I lifted up my shoulder fast, but she didn't do it. I admired her even more for not doing it. I knew she had seen her own hand flash out and smack me to kingdom come, but she stopped the future from happening, like in those old movies when someone gets sent back to change the future, only she did it for herself right now. She straightened up and breathed deep. I wondered if I could ever do that, rewind and change the future. You could do it if you were strong like Mrs. Holmes and not strung out on L.A. Ice like my mother.

I kept talking, I said how Pinco got all excited about hiring some teen-age boys, gangsta types—

"Taroq don't hang with no gang."

"Well, I don't know if it was a gang gang. It was just some guys— " I slowed down a little. "It was just some guys cutting school, and Rafael found them in a park somewhere shooting hoops—"

"I don't know no Rafael."

"He's the one they call the Catcher. But he found these boys— "

"What names?"

"They didn't say their real names, but one of them was called Little R."

"Oh it would be Little R. That boy has done things to get Taroq in trouble since they were in diapers. I swear. Who else?"

" I told her as best I remembered, and she kept shaking her head when she figured out who each one of them was, and I could tell by this time she was believing it, but she was busy being a detective because she didn't want to hear

what it was Taroq had done.

So finally I said it straight up: "They were getting paid ten dollars, but he wasn't paying the girls. He just gave us cots in the warehouse, and meals."

"Pray to Jesus," said Mrs. Holmes with her eyes all narrow again.

I was feeling a different wave I get sometimes, when I just don't care anymore. I don't do drugs, except when Craig kept giving me stuff to make me think it was a party when I was living with him. And a little bit of weed now and then to relax, until I figured out that Pinco was putting it on our tab. But even though I don't do drugs, sometimes I get this feeling like I'm so high I don't care. "Taroq and his friends got to go home to their mommas with some money in their pockets and us girls were stuck. Your precious Taroq was fucking girls for ten dollars a day, Mrs. Holmes."

I was sure I was going to get the slap then, but she got very serious instead and stood up.

"I have to go see my pastor," she said. "You wait here." It was like manhole covers over ugly things had started to lift up in the streets.

"Don't turn me in," I said.

"Turn you in to who? Your pimp? To the police? I hate to tell you, baby, but the police around here don't care. I just don't want you living here reminding Taroq. I want you out of here, gone, but I'm going to go talk to my pastor first. And ask her what to do about my son, and I'm going to ask my pastor how we can get help for you too."

I followed her into her room. She took off her little snap front puffy sleeved robe thing. She had the nicest skin. She pushed me out and closed the door, but I kept talking through the door.

"Mrs. Holmes, I'll clean for you. I have a plan, I got it all figured out, I'll get a job, I figure you know somebody who can give me a job in a little store or something, or at the church, I could clean the church. I'll be just like a sister to Taroq, all I needs a place to stay- just give me a chance-"

She came out in a sweat suit. Her cheeks were wet from crying.

"I'm sorry about what Taroq did," I said. "I'm really sorry. He's the nicest boy, Mrs. Holmes. I know this isn't going to sound possible, but he was respectful, even when we were, you know, making the movies. He asked me if I was cold."

She stood with her hand on the door when I said nice things about Taroq.

"And we talked when we got a break, and he told me about you and about Taliyah and your other son. And I wanted to be part of a family like that, Mrs. Holmes."

"You stay here, Tara," she said. "I'm going to talk to my pastor, and maybe my pastor will come back with me. My pastor had a son who did wrong and also she is raising her daughter's child. My pastor will know how to find something for

you. I can't do this alone."

"I can't either!" I said, but she was out the door, and closed the door, and I don't know if she heard me. And then this thing came over me: like, why doesn't she just give me a chance? Why is she so mean to me? And I turned away from the door again and saw all her dolphins and sea shells and I could see my arm reaching out and sweeping them off the shelves and tables and smashing them.

But I didn't do it. I stopped that future from happening. Then I sat down on the floor with my back against the wall. I didn't go to sleep, but I let my mind drift off, and I thought my plan might still work, maybe that woman preacher would make her let me stay. Or maybe something else will happen. The woman preacher might know some kind of place for teenagers to live, like Pinco's but nice, with a big room downstairs where you could hang with other kids and cook and watch t. v. And jobs. I'd get a job and earn money and pay my share. Or the woman preacher might be tall and beautiful, like my mother would be if she wasn't a drugged out skeleton. And, I thought, like I was telling myself a story, the beautiful woman pastor will take care of me and her little grandchild both, and we'll all live together happily ever after.