

I don't want Papa's car to break down because cars scare me and because Auntie Wong lives so far away. Mootseen and Papa have been arguing about whether they should drive to Auntie Wong's house for Chinese New Year's or if we should try to get a ride from Rich Uncle Yip, who has a large minivan that would fit all of us.

Lately, Mootseen and Papa have been very quiet around me. This is okay. When I leave the kitchen after dinner, I normally build homes for my family out of Legos. There are five bedrooms, living rooms with clocks, always two bathrooms (one for me and one for Mootseen and Papa, since I always have to use theirs in the morning), and a shiny red car with no roof (but there could be a roof if I wanted!). Sometimes, Papa accidentally steps on them as he walks to the front porch after he and Mootseen have been arguing in the kitchen. If I'm really on top of things, I can fix my home before he sits down on the single porch chair. Most nights, this is when Mootseen comes and sits with me on the floor, helping me even though her hands are normally shaking too much to be any big help. This is okay too. She gives up quickly and just watches me and says, "You're so good at this, Lo -- you should be an engineer." I still don't know what an engineer is, but I smile because she is smiling and that is enough for me. I just like to build.

But building the cars is my favorite! I can make them any way I want to -- with four flashing wheels, with twenty leather seats, with seven different colors (like a rainbow!), with a big mansion on top of them, anything! And if the car does not drive when I push it, I can figure out what is wrong very quickly, brick-by-brick. This is very different with real cars, like Papa's old Ford Aspire. When they get creaky, I can't do anything but feel the ticking. I don't like the ticking because I don't want the car to break down because cars scare me.

I almost died in a car three years ago when I was seven. Papa was driving his new used Ford Aspire, the one that Mootseen got him for his fortieth birthday, and he had just put in a pine-scented air freshener. There are not a lot of trees where I live, so this was very exciting. We were driving down the Boulevard out of the city and I was just so happy that I jumped in my chair. Papa turned around to get a good look at me then, because I was smiling so much and hopping in my seat, but that's when the not-so-nice man hit our new used car as it was crossing an intersection only a few blocks away from our house. Papa's right leg popped and looked like it wasn't bent the right way after that. Mootseen cried a lot as she held my hand, half her face covered by her other palm since Papa had to be placed down onto some thin bed and put in the ambulance. The Ford Aspire had its mouth dangling open and its side beaten in, and the sirens were so loud that I couldn't hear much until the next day. This was okay, though, since Papa made it to the hospital safely.

When Papa came back from the hospital, he had to use a wheelchair. It was one of those really cool ones with a joystick like in arcade machines. Sometimes, when he was already lying in bed, he would let me sit in it and move all around the room with the joystick. He laughed a lot when I did this, and Mootseen would come into the bedroom and laugh with us. Her smile stretched her face then, and her eyes disappeared into her face. She'd kiss my forehead, say, "Okay, Lo, it's getting late and you've got school tomorrow" and then I would do my pouty face so I could stay up later than I was allowed on school nights. Papa always winked at me after I did this because he thought it was funny. I couldn't wink back yet, but these nights were my favorite times. I wished they happened every night. Sometimes, Papa told stories of how he proposed to

Mootseen, how their wedding rings glistened gold when they loved each other most. Mootseen's always did.

One afternoon a few months later, I was in my bedroom with my Legos when Papa started yelling at someone in the house. Sometimes he yells at the TV if the Eagles lose, especially if it's against the Cowboys. But this time, Mootseen's voice started yelling back.

"Oh, so I'm getting in the way of things. You're right, Dalton, you're right. I'll just let you do everything by yourself." It was obvious that she wasn't too happy with Papa, especially after he muttered something I couldn't hear from my room.

"Get a job from home then! You can't go back to construction -- your knee is never going to be back where."

"You don't know that. Dr. Robot says I'll be back in shape in a few months"

"Months? Dalton, we don't have enough money for weeks. We need the money now, just get over yourself, and find something online. Anything."

"Biyu, please, I'm doing everything I can, I'll be okay soon and then --"

"Everything you can? Everything you can? Please tell me how 'everything you can' involves sitting on your ass all day watching stupid sit-coms. It's not working, Dalton, it's not."

This was when the quietness started.

But today is Chinese New Years! My family gives me money in little red envelopes so I can buy Legos, but I really care about the food. We eat lunch at Auntie Wong's because she has a very large house with a grand piano and two staircases to the second floor and had four bathrooms (every year, I try to use the bathroom four times, each time in a different bathroom).

Auntie Wong always tells me how much she loved my Mootseen, how Mootseen is her favorite sister who unfortunately married some ugly German-American. This is okay, though, since I never tell Papa about what Auntie Wong and the other Aunties and Uncles on Mootseen's side say about him. Mootseen always wanted to drive her car because her car looked better than Papa's.

This year, however, Mootseen had to sell her car back to the bank, so we only had Papa's bruised Ford Aspire to take to Auntie Wong's. It was the one that broke down in the accident, and I was scared that we would get hit again. This would be bad since Auntie Wong lived three hours away and we had no money to fix the Aspire (that's what Mootseen says). This car scared me the most of all cars because it sounded like a train chugging and all the lights stayed on the display.

Rich Uncle Yip rang us around nine this morning and said that he could not take us to Auntie Wong's, so we had no other choice but to take the Ford Aspire. Papa's face scrunched up like a piece of crinkled construction paper. I helped Mootseen load the left half of the backseat with her homemade tangyuan as Papa limped into the front passenger seat. I took my spot next to the tangyuan and curled up under my seatbelt to get comfy. Mootseen opened the door to the driver's spot.

"Three hours is a long time..." she murmured to herself. Papa continued to look at our front porch, the weeds poking up from the cracks in the brick.

Now we are one hour into the trip. The thick river of highway traffic is slowing us down, so we are probably only thirty minutes away from home still. Mootseen and Papa are in quiet

time again. The lights on the dashboard keep flickering on and off. In order to calm down, I've been counting road signs, but my eyes are droopy now. It is time for a nap. My head is hurting and my tummy is uncomfy, and Papa and Mootseen aren't saying anything anyway.

When I wake up, I notice Mootseen nervously looking at Papa. His face is pale and his eyes are shaking as her attention returns to the road. Even though it was in the sun, Mootseen's wedding ring looks like a dull yellow.

"I don't understand," Papa whispers, crying now, "I don't understand." Mootseen makes eye contact with me, seeing I'm awake. He looks at her for an answer, and Mootseen begins to cry. I'm scared, scared because I don't want this car to break down, but I think it will soon. All of the display lights are on.

"Not in front of Lo, Dalton. Not yet."