

## **Burning**

*Lucy Zhang*

I think Mom wishes Dad never came home. He nearly drove us into a ditch after seeing an empty cardboard box sitting between two lanes.

‘Aiyah, what’s wrong with you? Do you not have a brain? Do you want to kill us?’ she yelled.

Driving into the ditch wouldn’t have killed anyone, but it certainly would’ve bruised us up and damaged the car enough to require thousands in repair. Each word enunciated with the same, flat tone, he replied, ‘Don’t shout. You can drive next time.’

But Dad still drives me to school since Mom leaves to work early and returns late to accommodate meetings with her team’s China counterparts.

Dad doesn’t work anymore. He keeps losing his job because he freaks out over things like flashing monitor displays or unwieldy customers. He had served at the Hunan restaurant Village Kitchen for a week and dropped all the chinaware onto the ground when the chef tossed chili peppers into a wok of hot oil, the sudden sizzle and crackle sending Dad into defense mode. Now, Dad stays home and helps me with math homework if I need it, but I prefer not to ask since he starts yelling if I take too long to understand his explanation.

Because Mom returns home late, Dad cooks dinner — a vegetable, meat, and rice, the same combination of a-choy, pork, and oyster sauce stir-fried over and over again. Half the time, the dishes taste like they’ll burn my tongue off.

‘I can’t taste anything,’ Dad insists before dumping in more chili peppers. I wash the dishes and he mops the floor and then we walk around the neighborhood together when it’s quiet and all the kids have returned home from playing outside, not a single nerf gun being fired or softball being launched across a fence or frisbee cutting through the air.

‘The other girls always get strawberry shortcake bars first, and then none are left for me,’ I complain.

I don’t mention that Mom refuses to give me money to buy ice cream at school. Dad hands me two dollars every day to buy a sweet treat. I think he doesn’t know what to do with his money other than to indulge me. Whenever we run out of soap, he dilutes the shampoo bottle

with 99% water, and only when Mom notices water is being dispensed does she yell at him for neglecting to drop by CVS for a new bottle.

‘You should get to the front of the cafeteria line earlier,’ Dad replies.

‘I can’t,’ I say. ‘We get called up in alphabetical order. I’m always last.’

‘That makes no sense,’ Dad shakes his head. ‘Rules should have reasons. Don’t follow stupid rules.’

‘School is just stupid rules.’

Dad nods, ‘Sure is.’

We walk around the block twice even though I can’t feel my nose. Dad wears shorts and a t-shirt. I’m not sure how he hasn’t frozen over, how he continues to trek forward with complete control over his legs. I pull my collar upward, trying to better cover my mouth and nose.

‘I’ve got to finish homework,’ I say as we close in on the second loop around the block. My fingers have begun to turn purple, but I don’t want to admit to Dad I can’t walk anymore.

After I retreat to my room, I hear Mom ask, ‘Can’t you go back to school for a computer science degree? Those software engineers earn so much by doing nothing but eating free food, compiling some code, and scrolling through Twitter.’

She always forgets how thin the walls are, and that I can pick up on even the clink and thud when she tosses her briefcase to the floor, the buckle knocking against the hardwood.

‘I’m not interested in computers,’ Dad claims, even though he was apparently a huge computer nerd before leaving for war.

Mom clicks her tongue.

‘And I’m not interested in Chinese software legal regulations, but would you look at that, I’m the only one who speaks Chinese so I get to ping pong back and forth with that crazy team.’

I pull the duvet over my head.

I dump my books on my desk when I hear Mom’s footsteps. She pushes the door open, a steaming cup of chrysanthemum tea stirred with red dates, wolfberry, and honey. I always have headaches and she thinks if I drink enough of her tea concoctions, I’ll be cured.

‘You must’ve gotten all this fidgetiness from your Dad,’ she accuses me, even though Dad only started fidgeting after he returned home.

Before leaving, Dad could sit still in one spot for hours watching historical dramas set in the Qin Dynasty. Not even dinner time or the beep of the rice cooker could move him from the couch. Sometimes he'd fall asleep in front of the TV and wake up to Mom's yelling, 'Why didn't you defrost the fish? Why is the front door unlocked? You're lucky we don't live in a ghetto else who knows what could happen.' These days, Dad is always moving from one room to the other, staring out the window at our neighbor's lawn full of pipe cleaner spiders stuck to stakes in the dirt — leftover decorations from Halloween. I never see him fall asleep, not in front of the TV, not when I get up in the middle of the night to pee and find him downstairs, drinking a can of Coke I snuck back from the school vending machine. Mom refuses to buy soda but Dad developed a craving after returning home.

I've been fidgety since as early as I can remember having to take math exams that required drawing straight lines on graph paper — quivering my wrist, bobbing my leg, pacing back and forth, and even spinning around on my heel. If I grip my pencil hard enough to leave an imprint on my fingers, I can just about quell any vibrations. As long as I stop acting like I've got problems, Mom doesn't care if I was born like this or developed this way over time.

'Dad doesn't fidget, he *reacts*,' I say, sipping the tea. The honey overrides the bitterness enough to resemble an off-flavored juice. I cup the mug and press it to my cheek. Mom only turns on the heater when she thinks the pipes will freeze so any steamy beverage helps.

'Focus on your studies,' she replies, closing the door.

I begin bobbing my leg again, glancing down at my problem set and then to the door for the next hour. Mom leaves for the clubhouse at eight to work out with her friends — old people dancing with red, silk fans and glittery handkerchiefs. She tried to invite me along but I don't want the other aunties to call me clumsy. Instead, I sneak from my room and search for Dad. Finding Dad is like a game, especially at night since he refuses to turn on the lights or else risk attracting malicious attention. We removed our motion-sensitive night lights after he nearly kicked a hole through the drywall when one flickered on as he passed.

Dad stands on the backyard patio, looking upward. There are no stars in the sky, only the occasional blinking light of a plane flying by.

'It's not going to drop a bomb,' I say. 'It's just a commercial plane.'

'Of course it is.'

But I don't think he really believes me. He stares even after the blinking lights disappear from view. I only hear the wind lacing its way through tree branches, trying to rustle leaves to the ground.

'Listen real closely,' he says. 'Explosions always happen during the quiet.'

So we stand there listening, waiting, and when the garage roars open and Mom parks her car and slams the door close, I resist the urge to rush inside and clean up the table, rinse out the tea leaves from mugs, move the overflow boxes of bulk-purchased sweet potatoes and tofu to the freezing garage. Mom always finds something to gripe about even if nothing in the house has changed since she left. The garage door creaks open. I can hear Mom kick off her shoes, clink the keys on the laundry machine, and toss her gym bag to the ground. I hear the pitter patters of mung beans as she dumps them into a bowl and rinses and soaks them in water. Breakfast is always mung bean soup with no sugar because Mom thinks cooling foods will balance out all the ammunition and explosions that Dad had to deal with. 'You haven't realised you've been burning,' she tells him when he protests the beans.

I listen to Mom's footsteps fade as she heads upstairs. Dad shuffles to the edge of our backyard, the boundary between our patio and the open land where kids play.

'Mom is asking for you,' I lie, afraid he'll disappear into the dark.

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