

Learning to drive defensively

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The night before George Zimmerman is acquitted for the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, Little Brother refuses to sleep, waiting up for me to come home late from a research trip to the top of the tallest mountain in the world and back. I am shattered with altitude sickness, and Little Brother wraps his arms around my neck and kisses my face, “You’re the best mommy in the world. Really you are.”

The night before George Zimmerman is acquitted for the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, Little Brother is nine years old, tall for his age, and beautifully brown from swimming under the summer sun. The aunties all coo over him – “xiao shuai ge” – and he blushes with embarrassment as they heap another serving of mac salad on his plate.

The night after George Zimmerman is acquitted for the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, I teach my sweet and naïve multiracial nine-year-old baby boy how to take off his hoodie, slow down his movements, keep his hands visible, steady his voice, and make himself small in front of police and strange white men with guns.

The lessons about strange white women will come later.

Little Brother tells me about his friend, Officer Gold, the African American police officer who comes to his school to read colorful storybooks about spotted police dogs.

And I have now taught him how to hide everything that is good and pure about himself.

Several months after George Zimmerman is acquitted for the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, a police car is parked in the snow in front of our neighborhood grocery store late one night after Chinese school. As we walk in, Little Brother immediately takes off his hoodie. He says, “Mommy Mommy, take off your hat, take off your hat.” It’s the middle of winter in Michigan, I don’t want to take off my hat. “Mommy Mommy, take off your hat.” I am so tired and distracted that I do not notice how frightened he is as we walk up and down the aisles looking for salsa and tortillas for xiao yeh. “Mommy Mommy, take off your hat.”

By the time we get to the checkout, he is such a wreck that I finally notice and ask the cashier why the police had been there. She said they were helping an old man who was intoxicated.

Little Brother does not know what the word intoxicated means.

When we get home, I try to reassure him that police are supposed to help us, that he does not always have to be afraid.

But how does a nine year old tell the difference?

How do any of us?

Today, Little Brother is 16 years old, 6 feet tall, a mop of #quarantinehair, and learning to drive. As he jokes that he is a Master Driver, I tell him that driving takes a lot of trust. You trust that other drivers will stay on their side of the road, you trust that they will stop at the stop sign, you trust that they will follow right of way. You learn to drive defensively because you do not really know. Yet you trust.

Uncle Chien gives Little Brother an old beater car, a 16-year-old boy's dream, and after months of quarantine, he is READY. Ready to set forth into the world.

But with Covid-19-inspired-anti-Asian violence, anti-Black and Brownness, police brutality, angry white men with AR15s, and coronavirus too, I sort of like quarantine. I can teach Little Brother about the Vincent Chin case and #StopAAPIhate and #BlackLivesMatter and #Asians4BlackLives, but I am not ready. Not ready to trust the world.

Bio

Frances Kai-Hwa Wang is a journalist, essayist, speaker, and poet focused on issues of diversity, race, culture, and the arts. Her writing has appeared at NBC News Asian America, PRI Global Nation, Cha Asian Literary Journal. She teaches Asian/Pacific Islander American media and civil rights at the University of Michigan. She co-created a multimedia artwork for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. She is a 2019 Knight Arts Challenge Detroit artist, Marguerite Casey Foundation Equal Voice Journalism Fellow on Poverty, and Keith Center for Civil Rights Detroit Equity Action Lab Race and Justice Reporting Fellow on the Arts. franceskaihwawang.com @fkwang

Short description (113 words)

The day after George Zimmerman is acquitted for the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, an Asian American mother teaches her multiracial nine-year-old son how to stay safe while interacting with police and strange white men with guns. But how does a nine year old tell the difference between police who are a threat and police who are there to help? How do any of us? Seven years later, as the country erupts with Covid-19-inspired-anti-Asian violence and anti-Black and Brownness, the son is 16, a mop of #quarantinehair, and the mother wrestles with the idea of trust as she teaches him how to drive defensively – behind the wheel and out in the world.