



“How would you like to sleep in a bed all summer instead of in our car?” she asks.

“At the Health Fair, the woman there offered me a job. I’m going to help in a program for people like us, people who work hard to find homes. We’ll be able to afford a room,” Mama explains.

“Oh, Mama! Will you be able to save for that courtyard apartment while you work there? And study too?”

“I hope so,” she says and hugs me tighter.

I nestle in her arms. “Mama, I’m sorry for being mean sometimes.” Then I snuggle closer and fall asleep, knowing that, with or without an apartment, I’ve got Mama and she’s got me.

Monica Gunning
A Shelter in our car
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(Adapted)



A Shelter in Our Car

Police cars are coming closer. The sirens hurt my ears and the lights blind my eyes. I jump up, really, really frightened.

“Shhh, Zettie, lie down,” Mama says. “We don’t want to be noticed.”

We sink between the clothes on the back seat of the car. “Mama, it’s creepy sleeping in our car,” I whisper.

“I know,” she says. “Things happen in the city. Police cars are always on some kind of chase.”

She holds me close until the sirens stop.

When all is quiet, Mama drives down Chandler Avenue and parks in front of a courtyard apartment house. Its garden is filled with flowers – bougainvilleas, roses, hibiscus – in the streetlight, their colors as bright as the flowers in the yard we left behind in Port Antonio. Mama and I love parking in this spot.



For weeks, a For Rent sign has hung in one of the windows. We asked about it last week, but the owner told us he'd only rent to someone with a steady job. And he wants the first and last months' rent, which Mama doesn't have.

I close my eyes. Soon I'm in dreamland, back home in Jamaica with Papa and Grandma Mullins. We're picnicking on the beach. Waves pound against the rocks. Crash, bang! I wake up. No, I'm not in Jamaica. I'm in America. And it's not the waves crashing against rocks. Someone's knocking on our car window.

A flashlight glares in our eyes.

"What are you doing here?" a policeman asks sternly.

"My little girl and I are only stopping for the night, sir."

"Overnight parking here is not allowed," he says. "You have to find some other place."

"I will, sir, but we're not doing anything wrong," Mama says. She gets into the front seat and drives away. Tears roll down her cheeks, like they did when Papa died.

I lean over and stroke her locks. "Mama, why don't we go by Magnolia Avenue, over near the park? There, the police don't even bother Mr. Williams when he sleeps on the bench."

"That's my girl! I forgot about that place."

She parks the car on Magnolia Avenue. We settle down, and soon I'm asleep in her arms.

could be so nice. I thought they were all mean.

It seems like forever that I wait. I only have Mama now, I think. Where is she? What will happen to me if anything happens to her? Will the policeman have to place me in a foster home? Living in a car isn't the best thing in the world, but at least I've had Mama loving me and taking care of me.

Then I hear a car honking.

It's Mama. Tears spatter her face. She cries, "Why did you leave the playground, Zettie? Why?" Sobbing, I tell her what happened.

"I was scared, Mama. That's why I ran down here."

"I thought you went to the park," she continues. "Benjie and Ana Mae helped me look for you. We were all so worried. Thank goodness you're safe." She waves to the policeman to let him know everything's okay.

Between tears, I force a smile. Mama's eyes are still red. I can tell she was crying a lot, worrying about me.

She puts her arm around me. "We both need to relax tonight," she says. "I worked a long day at the Health Fair again and they paid me for more hours. Let's celebrate this evening."

We drive to a cafeteria for spaghetti and ice cream. After supper, Mama winks. "Surprise! We'll sleep in a real bed tonight."

"In a motel? That really comfy one we slept in last time?" I cry out.

As soon as we check into our room, I dash inside the bathroom and turn on the shower. The water tickles my back.

"Oh Mama, warm water feels sooo good! I wish I could have a shower every day."

When I jump into bed, I stretch out, wiggle my toes and bring the clean sheet up to my nose. Mama hugs me and calls me Buttercup, and I can feel her love washing over me.

“Junk Car Zettie!” he teases. “Watch out for Junk Car Zettie!” he calls to his friends. They all laugh and yell it out real loud, “Junk Car Zettie!”

“Dumbbells!” I shout at the boys.

That makes them really angry. Alex pulls my plats again, hard!

I’m scared now. Not a teacher around anywhere. What should I do? Finally, I run, faster than I ever thought I could run. Away from the playground down the street to a far corner. Now they can’t see me.

I’m out of breath and panting when I see Mama drive up the street next to the school gate. She gets out of the car to look for me.

“Mama! Mama!” I call, waving to get her attention, but she doesn’t see me. She gets back into the car and turns around. I shout louder and run toward her, but I trip and she drives away.



My knee is skinned and bleeding. I hobble back to the corner. Then I sit down and cry. Our lives have changed so much since Papa died ...

I wait for a while, my eyes still on the playground, but Mama doesn’t return. Where did Mama go? Knowing that she’s out looking for me only makes me cry harder.

I open my eyes to the whirr of a motorcycle stopping. It’s a policeman! Am I in trouble?

He asks, “Are you lost?”

“No, sir. My mama is late picking me up.”

“I can’t leave you here alone,” he says. He sounds kind.

He stays close to watch ... but not too close. I didn’t know a policeman

Early next morning, Mama wakes me up and reminds me, “Let’s use the rest room in the park before it gets crowded.”

It’s chilly there, and I shiver as I put on my school clothes. Then I splash water on my face from the faucet.

“Mama, this water is cold as ice.”

“Try to be brave,” she whispers.

We go outside and sit down on a bench. Mama braids my hair in four plats, the way I like it, but she pulls hard to make it look just right. I start singing a song I made up, trying not to notice when she yanks too hard.

For a while Mama hums along, but when I sing louder, she puts a finger to her lips.

“Not so loud, Zettie. You’ll wake Mr. Williams.”

Mama opens our little ice chest and makes peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We drink some leftover orange soda. It’s sweet, but does not taste very well. We’ve had it for three days.

“I wish we had some hot chocolate,” I say. “The kind you used to make from the cocoa beans we picked near home.”

“It makes me sad that you don’t have some.” She looks into my eyes. “Do you remember the sun in Jamaica?” Mama asks. “How brightly it shone after a shower of rain?”

I do remember. Especially on cold, cloudy days like today. Why did Papa have to die? With Mama’s now-and-then day jobs, and her working so hard at community college, it’s like having dark, wet days all the time.

“When I get a steady job there’ll be sunshine again,” Mama says, as if she read my mind.



I'm silent. I hear that from Mama all the time, but things are harder now.

On the way to school, I say, "Mama, could you ..."

"What is it, Zettie?"

"Could you drop me off at the corner behind the school?"

"Why?" she asks.

"Mean boys say our car is old and junky. They make fun of the flag in the window. Why do you have to keep it there, Mama?" I ask.

She pulls over and hugs me. "Pay them no mind, my child. Get your book learning just like your Papa did, and hold your head high. I'll take down the flag."

I hurry out of the car to get away. "I'll wait for you on the playground after school," I call out over my shoulder.

Mama picks me up after school. I duck my head into my jacket so no one will recognize me as I scurry into the car.

"There were no office jobs at the Temporary Agency today," Mama tells me.

"Does that mean we'll eat peanut butter and jelly again tonight?" I ask.

"No! I did something else, though. Guess what?"

"We'll never get an apartment if you don't get a steady job," I say.

"I handed out fliers at a Health Fair. Didn't make much money, but I have enough to buy some supper and some gas for the car."

My face feels hot and my chest is tight. Why can't Mama do some other kind of work?

I'm hungry and that makes forget that I am sad. "Can we get hot dogs and buns to share with Ana Mae and Benjie at the park?"

When we arrive, Benjie runs up to me. He's eight, just like I am, but small and bony. Mama makes us all some dinner. His eyes shine when he sees the hot dogs, and I wonder if he has eaten anything today.

"Want to come with me look for empty cans and bottles to sell?" Benjie asks afterwards

"I don't know ..." I say. Mama watches me pretty closely and doesn't pretty like my rummaging around. Benjie is saving money from the cans and bottles we sell, to help his mother. He already has \$1.50.

"Stay where I can see you, and be careful," Mama calls. Benjie runs around and between the trees looking for bottles and cans. He starts to dig into the garbage to find some. But I tell him that's dangerous, and he stops.

We're happy with Benjie's pile today. He'll probably make another dollar.



"You're my best friend," Benjie tells me as he waves.

"You are mine too," I say.

That night Mama and I curl up on the back seat of the car and Mama reads to me from a book we got at the library.

"Sleeping in the car is better than at the church shelter," I tell Mama. "I hated that noisy, crowded place! A baby cried the whole time. Remember?"

"That's why I'd rather use our car as a shelter, Zettie," she answers.

I snuggle beside her and she begins to study for one of her exams.

The next day after school, I read my book as I wait for Mama on the playground. Just as I turn the page, Alex the bully sneaks up behind me and yanks my plats.

A Shelter in Our Car. Bias, Discrimination & Hate. Author(s): Monica Gunning. Illustrator(s): Elaine Pedlar. Age GroupÂ Zettie's mother can't find a steady job so they are forced to live in their car. But her mother's unwavering love, support and gutsy determination give Zettie the confidence that, together, she and her mother can meet all challenges. purchase this book. book of the month. Fry Bread: A Native American Family Tradition. Kevin Noble Maillard. This book is a celebration of old and new, traditional and modern, similarity and differenceâ€telling the story of a modern Native American family.