Carlotta Learns About Her Medicine

Written by Matthew R. Galvin, M.D. Cover Illustration by Sandy Laramore
In the land where cars grow up much as people do, Carlotta's older brother, Rodrigo, often traveled the road ahead and sometimes beside her. Rod liked questions. His favorite was “How soon can I get on the INTERSTATE?” That's where speeds were fastest in the land.

Like Rod, Carlotta went to roadster-school. In roadster-school, young cars went to a track to practice following directions. Sometimes there were several directions to keep in mind at once. Carlotta wanted to learn, but like Rod, she had real problems. Like Rod, she could not pay attention to her teacher. She wanted to ask, “What did you say again, Mr. Jalopey?” Like Rod, Carlotta struggled with homework.

But Rod brought his unfinished homework to school and honked until his teacher helped him. Carlotta never honked her horn in class. She was too worried the teacher would think badly of her. Each question went hand-in-hand with an “AFRAID-I-MIGHT,” like: “I’m afraid-I-might get in trouble if I ask him to repeat what he said” or: “I’m afraid-I-might look silly to my classmates if I ask.”

Instead of honking for help in the day, she stayed up at night. After many sleepless hours, Carlotta often did figure out the answers. But then she was so
tired, she slept through her alarm. And in her hurry, she forgot her homework altogether. She had nothing to show Mr. Jalopey for all the work she’d done and could think of nothing to do except cry.

In the land of cars, there ‘s an old saying: “It’s the squeaky wheel that gets oiled first.” Rod was restless and drove without thinking. So others noticed him at a young age. Unlike her brother, Carlotta had trouble getting noticed much at all. When she was noticed, it was because she often seemed to daydream. Classmates teased and asked Carlotta, “On a road-trip in la-la-land having fun?” Carlotta thought, “If la-la-land is where you worry so much about paying attention that you lose track, then it’s not a very fun place to be.” She said nothing aloud.

Good thing for Carlotta sayings aren’t always true. Because of Rod, Mrs. Vehicularo was alert to problems when Carlotta started school. So, there was a parent/teacher talk. Afterwards, Mom arranged for them to see Dr. Wheeler.

Dr. Wheeler introduced herself and invited them into her office. Once everyone was parked, Dr. Wheeler smiled and said, “Carlotta, your mom asked me to see you today to find out about your problems. To do that, I need to ask you personal questions. By ‘personal’ I mean your thoughts, your feelings, what’s important to you, choices you make, and things you do. Before we start, I want you to know that I’ve seen your brother for some time. He told me it was O.K. to tell you. I would like to know if that makes you worried or uncomfortable.”
After awhile, Carlotta said, “I don’t think I want Rod to know what we talk about.”

“O.K. I won’t tell Rod things you don’t want him to know.”

“There might be some things I want him to know.”

“We can talk about those things before you tell him, if you like. But there are persons in your pit crew with whom I would like to be free to talk about your problems.”

Carlotta exclaimed, “Pit Crew? You mean like at a race where everyone is watching?”

“Don’t you like running races while everyone watches?”

“Oh no. I don’t want to be a race car. But-” Carlotta stopped.

“But what, Carlotta?” Dr. Wheeler had a friendly smile.

Carlotta sighed, “I would like to be able to drive myself to interesting places and take things to other persons who need them.”

“Well, Carlotta, we aren’t trying to win a race and won’t be in anyone else’s hurry. O.K.?”

Carlotta nodded, “I don’t mind a pit crew if I don’t have to race.”

Dr. Wheeler continued, “Two of the persons in your pit crew you already know - your mom and Mr. Jalopey. I may ask another special mechanic, Dr.
Beemer, to check your engine, your oil, your tire pressure, and your headlights. Together we will try to help you.”

After awhile, Dr. Wheeler said, “Carlotta, you have been very patient to answer so many questions. Thank-you. Now do you have any questions for me?”

Carlotta clutched. She couldn’t think of any.

Dr. Wheeler said, “It’s O.K. I’ll bet you will think of some to ask next time.”

As Mom made dinner, Carlotta told Rod about her visit with Dr. Wheeler.

“On one test, I had to press the bar down whenever the computer flashed a Stop Sign followed by a Caution Sign, but it kept tricking me with false signals. I was frustrated. I---”

Rod interrupted, “I had to do that, too. It’s enough to send a car into road-rage. What you should really worry about is Dr. Beemer. He’s the kind of doctor who can give shots.”

“Mom!!”

“Don’t worry about shots, Carlotta. Rod is teasing you,” Mom reassured her.

“Mom, when can I go on the Interstate?” Rod wanted to know.

“I think Dr. Wheeler is more interested in INNER-STATES, isn’t she Rod?” Mom smiled.

“What are those, Rod?” Carlotta wanted to know.
“It’s hard to explain to little cars.”

“Oh, I don’t think you even know.”

“Do to!”

“Do not!”

If young cars could stomp away, that is just what Carlotta would have done then. Instead she backed up and turned around to find another parking space away from her brother. She was fuming.

“Rodrigo, I want to talk to you alone,” said Mrs. Vehicularo.

“I’m sorry I teased you,” Rod apologized. “I went to see Dr. Beemer when I was in first grade. I needed medicine a few years. It helped. Now I’m trying without it-”

“Dr. Wheeler said I need to see Dr. Beemer too. I’m not sure what medicine’s supposed to do. I’m afraid-it-might-” Carlotta looked miserable.

Rod sighed, “Maybe you really should ask the doctors about medicines and your inner states. It’s hard for me to explain everything.”

As she promised, Dr. Wheeler met again with Carlotta and her mother.

“Carlotta, did you happen to think of any questions since our last visit?”
Carlotta was quiet. She thought, “Well, I’m not sure how to ask my question, I’m afraid-I-might-” Just then Carlotta took a risk. She asked in a voice so firm it surprised herself: “Do I have inner-states?”

“Of course you do, inner-states are part of personhood ~ the person-under-your-hood, you could say. It’s an important idea, especially when a person’s worried that something under her hood isn’t working as well as she would like.”

“Well what are the inner-states? I’m not sure.”

“That’s O.K. Let me tell you:

Thoughts you think;

Feelings you have;

What’s important to you; and

Choices you make~”

“When my motor isn’t tuned does it hurt my inner-states?”

“Not ‘hurt’ in the same way a fender-bender can hurt your body. But you do have a condition which makes it hard for your motor to stay tuned to the teacher. It makes it harder for you to stop and think, to see the best direction and to stick to what you’ve chosen to do. For you it’s even harder because you have lots of ‘afraid-I-mights’ that demand you tune in to them instead.”
“Carlotta, you can learn and practice thinking habits that will make you a better problem solver. Your pit crew, Mr. Jalopey at school, your mom at home and me in my office can help. And the special car medicines Dr. Beemer prescribes can help too.”

“What would medicines do to my inner states? Would medicines *make* me do things like listen all the time?”

Dr. Wheeler. “Carlotta, that is such a good question. I am so proud of you for asking it.”

Carlotta beamed.

“Hmm. We should try to answer your question together. When you wish a person well, what do you have in mind?”

Carlotta thought about what she wished for her brother Rod. She said, “Cool racing stripes and a built-in car phone and ~”

“Ah yes, good things to have. But what about the person-under-the-hood~what would be good for him?”

Carlotta said, “Hmm. I guess for his inner-states to be the best they can be.”

Dr. Wheeler nodded. “Yes. For instance, to be able to stop and think clearly and freely?”
Carlotta nodded, “What about feelings? Shouldn't a person always be happy?”

Dr. Wheeler shook her head ‘No.’

“I do want persons to be happy as much as possible, Carlotta, but more importantly I want them to be able to experience all the feelings a person is meant to have. I also want a person to be able to find out what’s important to her. She can’t do that very well if her condition won’t give her a very good chance. And one more thing ~”

“I think I know already, you want her to be able to choose.”

Dr. Wheeler laughed, “Absolutely. Like which direction she should take.”

Carlotta said, “So medicine could help?”

“It really could. Carlotta, there are special car medicines meant to work on the condition you have so that you are able to think freely, have a fuller range of feelings, be in touch with your values and make your own choices. But that’s all. You still have to learn how to listen, what to pay attention to, and decide where it’s best to go. You have to choose the directions you should take.”

“Could medicine make it harder for her to do those things?” Mom asked.

“We saw on TV how a car claimed his medicine gave him road rage when he caused a pile-up on the Interstate.”
“Carlotta, your mom also asks very good questions. There is some chance for many good medicines to make some persons feel more crabby or grouchy or even to become confused. They don't make persons into out-of-control robots.”

“Things medicines aren’t supposed to do are called side effects. They often aren’t too bad and don’t last long. If the side effects make inner-states worse instead of better Dr. Beemer stops or changes the medicine.”

Dr. Beemer did all the things that Dr. Wheeler had said he would. Carlotta told him what she had learned about her condition. Dr. Beemer was very impressed. Then he asked what treatment had been planned already. He listened and nodded and said “Good ideas.”

Then Dr. Beemer said, “Carlotta, which car medicine is best for you depends on what symptoms we want to treat. Like trouble paying attention and worrying too much. If just one medicine doesn’t work, a combination may be needed. Sometimes it takes a while to find the right combination.”

“How will we keep track of the symptoms?” Carlotta asked.

“Yes, how will we know it’s working?” Mom gave Carlotta a smile.

“Mrs. Vehicularo, the checklists will be a big help. The symptoms we track come from those. Once in awhile it will be good for you to update them. I’ll ask, ‘Carlotta, do you notice any changes in your inner states?’ and ‘Are there things
you don’t like about your medicine?’ I think you will become an important expert on yourself.”

It was time to go. Carlotta was glad to have learned so much:

About her personhood,

About her condition,

About special car medicines that can help.

About how Mom could call Dr. Beemer for more information.

About how she could tell the ‘afraid-I-mights’ to be still so she could talk to Dr. Wheeler more on her next visit.