THE BARRACUDA

When I was fourteen I was swallowed whole by a predatory, glassy-eyed fish. This was my dad’s fault. He purchased the black 1965 Plymouth two door hatchback Barracuda because it was classic and had a commando v8 engine, whatever that is. The car was nearly as old as I was. I hated it. If you would have told me that one day I’d change my mind about hating it, I’d have called you a big fat liar.

The Barracuda had to be the dumbest purchase my dad had ever made, especially considering he and my mother had become foster parents that summer. With two extra kids in our house we had become a family of six. The Barracuda only had five seats. That meant that someone had to ride in the glass covered hatchback.

According to my dad, the glass covering the hatchback was the largest window ever installed in a car. Which was nice, unless you had to ride beneath the glass, which sloped down to the rear of the car in a very artistic way. This did not allow much headroom. You either had to
sit hunched nearly double or lie on your back looking up through the glass at the sky as you zoomed down the road.

The shortest people in our family were relegated to taking turns suffering this hellish form of torture and, unfortunately for us, my foster sister, Azul, and I were the shortest. Azul had come to live with us at the beginning of the summer and was my age. Both of our foster kids that summer were fourteen. The other foster kid was a boy named Andy and, sadly for Azul and me, he was too tall to fit in the hatchback. My brother Markus was also too big to fit in the back—being sixteen and taller than Andy.

That summer my dad decided that we would take a trip in the ‘new’ car to our church’s world convention in Mexico City—one thousand five hundred ninety five miles away.

Without enough seats.

Without air conditioning.

My dad couldn’t understand why I didn’t want to go.

“There’s plenty of room in the back for you girls,” he insisted. He stretched his arms out wide and declared, “For gosh sakes! The glass covering the hatchback is 14.4 square feet!” His eyes had a sort of manic glow when he said this—I think he was bedazzled by the thought of driving the powerful, purring commando V8 engine down the road, tilting the little triangle window so that a nice breeze would cool his face, not considering what it would be like for Azul and me as we baked under 14.4 square feet of glass.
“I’m turning myself into the department of human services,” I declared when I heard about the trip and where I’d be riding much of the time. “I want a new family. A family that has a car with a seat I can ride in.”

My mother, always the optimist, said, “Oh, goodness—no need to be so dramatic! Just think, you’ll be able to get a really nice tan while riding down the road.”

When it was time to leave I arrived in the driveway wearing my lime green bikini. My mother glared at me as I spread my beach towel in the back of the hatchback. I tried to get Azul to wear her swimsuit too. She refused, stating that wearing a swimsuit without swimming was dumb. She wore her pink ‘hot pants’ and a yellow tank top.

My parents always planned for an early morning start when going on trips, but they always ended up leaving in the middle of the night. For some reason there were always random, non-trip related things they had to do before leaving—like fixing the gate in the backyard, even though we didn’t have a dog and it had been broken for six months. We pulled out of the driveway around midnight.

“We’ll be like cakes covered by a glass cake keeper,” Azul told me as I got settled into the back, taking the first turn. “I’m a cinnamon cake.”

Azul had light brown skin and caramel colored eyes. Her mother was from Mexico and her father was a former white cop from America who lived in Mexico City. According to Azul, her mother had crossed the border to get away from Azul’s abusive father while pregnant with Azul. I laughed when she had told me this. It seemed so backwards that her American father lived in Mexico and her Mexican mother lived in America. Azul got mad when I laughed because she didn’t think it was funny. She was right, it wasn’t funny.
Azul said I was vanilla cake.

“No I’m not,” I said. “I’m carrot cake.” I like carrot cake and I have red hair. I wonder why people call my color of hair red. It is not the color of blood or tomatoes. It really is closer to the color of carrot cake (without the raisins).

Azul started calling me Carrot Cake after that. I didn’t call her Cinnamon Cake though, because, honestly, that was a dumb sounding nickname and has too many syllables. Besides, I loved saying Azul—it was beautiful sounding. I saw ultramarine blue every time I said it.

I must admit that riding on your back under glass on a clear night was somewhat magical. It was sort of like you weren’t moving at all because the stars stayed in the same place.

That first night in the Barracuda the Big Dipper was hanging right above us. Azul squished into the back with me and we looked up into a black sky full of sparkling stars and glowing planets. I showed her how to spot the North Star—knowledge imparted to me by my father who, on every single camping trip in which the Big Dipper was visible, would flick on his flashlight, direct the beam toward the Big Dipper, then swoop it over to the North Star. All our trips were camping trips, by the way. We were going to camp on this trip too. My father put a hitch on the Barracuda and a small, silver pop up trailer bounced behind us as we flew through the night.

“The light you are seeing,” I whispered to Azul, “is six hundred eighty years old.” I whispered this because I didn’t want my dad to know that I had actually remembered one of his many ‘factoids.’

“I feel like I’m in a spaceship,” Azul said in a dreamy voice as she looked up through the glass.
I told her in a not-so-dreamy voice that we were going to feel like we’d spent six hundred years in a spaceship when we got to Mexico City.

Azul was excited to go on the trip, despite the torture aspect of the traveling arrangements. I think maybe she had this hope that somehow she would bump into her ex-cop American father on a random street in Mexico City. She’d see him and he’d see her and they would miraculously recognize each other and, even though he’d never laid eyes on her, he’d hug her and tell her he loved her.

Azul taught me a dirty poem in Spanish in exchange for me teaching her about the North Star. She wouldn’t tell me what the words of the poem meant. She giggled uncontrollably every time I recited it, which I enjoyed, even though I knew she was making fun of my ignorance.

The trip was a blur of hot sun, small puffy clouds, claustrophobic cloudy nights, burger joints, rest stops and late night stays in KOA’s. The popup trailer was basically a tent on wheels. It unfolded to make two large, bed-sized platforms on each side. Yup, that’s right—two beds—six people. Guess which two people had to sleep on the floor and get stepped on anytime someone had to get up in the night?

In protest to my unfair treatment I wore my bikini nearly every other day. I might have worn it every day but I had to wash it and let it dry. My mother gave up complaining about it after a while. My father threatened to burn it, not because he was worried about my appearance, he had no qualms about hippy fashion as he called it, except for the long hair on boys because boys should look like boys and girls should look like girls. No, what bothered him was the semi-trucks that constantly slowed down and stayed in the passing lane beside us, honking when a scantily clad teenage girl under glass waved at them and made the ‘honk your horn’ sign.
I think my bikini and Azul’s short shorts probably saved our lives because the honking truckers kept my father awake during the day—we were ‘behind schedule’ so he was driving long after sunset every night. He had the habit of nodding off at the wheel during the day.

When we finally crossed the border into Mexico we traveled through small towns where naked little kids ran around with chickens in dirt yards and giant cactus were used as corrals for farm animals. Eventually the desert gave way to the hills and mountains surrounding Mexico City.

When we hit the big traffic roundabout in Mexico City I cringed in horror as cars zoomed in and out five deep, no one staying in lanes. The Barracuda must have gone around the circle at least five times before shooting out in the right direction. I really don’t know how we made it to the convention center, other than my mother’s uncanny ability to read a map and convince my father that he should veer left when he wanted to veer right.

We spent most of our time at the convention center. I didn’t wear the bikini there because my mother declared I’d be condemned to hell if I wore it around church people (although, in my mind, I had already been through hell on the trip there).

Our time away from the convention center consisted of going to a museum with an ancient Mayan calendar and creepy mortuary masks, along with a tour of the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon, where apparently my bikini was something to stare at. Azul even seemed a little embarrassed to be seen with me.

I wore clothes when we went to the huge outdoor marketplace where we bargained for four small blown glass dolphins, two switch blades, a brightly colored blanket, and two sombreros (which got mashed flat in the popup trailer by the time we got home).
Azul and I bargained for the blown-glass dolphins at the booth of a middle-aged fat man with greasy black hair. When Azul asked the price in Spanish the man grinned and pulled out a pair of gimmicky black and white glasses. The lenses were whirling circles with ‘X-ray Vision’ written across the top. He made a show of slowly looking Azul up and down, as if he was using the x-ray glasses to see her naked body beneath her clothes. It was pretty creepy and disgusting—I laughed. Azul gave me a dirty look, said something scathing at the man in Spanish, and pulled me to the next booth where we bought the same glass dolphins from a smiling elderly lady with a silver front tooth.

I noticed that everywhere we went Azul searched faces as we walked down the crowded streets. But nobody stepped out of the crowds to declare that he was her father and that he loved her. I started looking too. I pictured an older Marine-looking guy with a butch haircut. He would be walking past, taller than everyone on the crowded street, and see Azul. Something about her would make him stop and stare. She would stare back and then say, “Dad?”

I knew it wouldn’t happen, but I do have a thing for fairy tales and happy endings and I wanted Azul to be happy.

The trip home was the reverse of the trip there, except exit out of Mexico required a thorough and lengthy search of the popup trailer and the Barracuda by border officials which entry into Mexico had not. A sour faced woman official made us open the popup and take everything out. She made Marcus and Andy empty their pockets and gave them a triumphant look when they revealed their newly purchased switchblades. She flicked the knives open, snapped the blades off then handed them back. The incredulous look on Marcus’ and Andy’s faces as they held their broken knives struck me as funny. I laughed. I shouldn’t have.
A man in a rumpled uniform with sweat stains under his armpits had a brief tug-of-war with Azul over a little cactus she had dug up and put in a plastic baggy. The man had snatched at the baggy without realizing that it contained a cactus and yelped in pain as he yanked it out of her hands. This made me laugh too.

When we reached home I discovered that my mother had been right, riding days and days under glass did result in Azul and me getting a nice tan, sort of a rosy tan for me and Azul’s skin turned a beautiful golden brown.

Near the end of that summer my parents informed us that we were moving. Andy had already gone back to his family weeks before, who, according to him, had just needed to ‘get back on their feet.’

My parents told Azul she had the choice to come with us since it was an in-state move. When Azul learned it was over two hundred miles away she refused; she didn’t want to be so far away from her mother. I begged her to come with us. She said it would break her mother’s heart. I was surprised she was worried about her mother’s heart. It sure seemed like her mother had put a pretty big crack in Azul’s heart by giving her up to foster care. Her mother rarely requested visitations. My heart developed some significant fissures when it became apparent we were leaving Azul behind.

We moved two weeks later—scheduled to leave early in the morning, but of course leaving in the middle of the night. Thankfully I got to ride in a seat in the Barracuda instead of under
glass and sometimes I rode shotgun in the rented moving van, punching my dad in the arm to keep him awake.

Azul had been transferred to a new family the week before we left. I rode my bike over to see her every day. On the day before we left I gave her a package of blue butterfly stationary with our new address on all the envelopes and stamps that my mom had bought for me to give to her. I wasn’t good with demonstrations of affection and Azul seemed sort of frozen so I just gave her a little wave and got on my bike and rode away feeling sort of like I should cry or something, but I didn’t.

After we moved away I had this ache. I’d never missed anyone like I missed Azul. If I could have chosen anyone in the world to be my sister, I would have chosen Azul.

I wrote to Azul. She wrote back to me.

Azul’s new foster family consisted of two elderly ladies who had never been married. Azul called them ‘The Gray Ladies’ because they had short straight, gray hair and always wore plain cotton house dresses in dull colors. The ladies required that she make her bed every day and share in all the household and outside chores. They had Bible study every night before bed and bedtime was eight o’clock. There were all sorts of rules: no talking on the phone or taking a bath if there was a thunderstorm (for fear of electrocution), no hot pants, no tank tops, no finger polish or makeup.

Azul said they were actually very nice and she was pretty sure she could have done whatever she wanted and gotten away with it. But the ladies were so gentle and oblivious of the world outside their church and large vegetable garden that she was afraid they might have duel
heart attacks if she so much as left her bed unmade or painted her toenails red. "It would be like rebelling against kittens," she wrote.

My mom took me two summers in a row to spend a week with The Gray Ladies and Azul. We snapped a lot of green beans and shucked peas—which was an oddly enjoyable thing to do when sitting in a rocking chair on a porch while listening to The Gray Ladies hum hymn melodies.

After we were good and settled in our new home, my parents agreed to become foster parents again. A baby was placed with us, Charlie. He was nearly a year old but didn’t know how to sit up or crawl because he had been pretty much ignored most of his short life. He had huge brown eyes and fluffy white hair. We had him for a year. While he was with us he learned to not only sit up, but to walk and play and was beginning to talk.

Then they sent Charlie back to his parents. We heard later that he was in the hospital for malnutrition. My parents offered to adopt him. It was the word ‘adopt’ that kept them from placing him back in our home. My mother was upset and said, "Apparently you aren’t supposed to get too attached." I had a hard time handling not getting Charlie back. Charlie was the last foster kid we had.

Azul and I continued to write. Suddenly her letters became full of the name Frank. She got a job after school at the feed store near The Gray Ladies’ house. That’s where she met Frank. He had his own house, land, some horses and a small cattle herd.

Frank was always flirting with her and trying to ask her out but she said ‘rednecks’ weren’t her type. She said he always wore a cowboy hat and cowboy boots and Wrangler jeans. And he was twenty-five. She was only seventeen. She was sure The Gray Ladies would faint if a guy
that old showed up on the doorstep to pick her up for a date. But apparently he had lots of money and drove a nice truck and began giving her gifts and calling her baby girl.

*Baby girl?* I rolled my eyes when I read that.

I know why he fell in love with her. She was movie-star beautiful with long, wavy black hair and the figure of a bathing suit model. And she was so very Azul-ish—quick to smile, unassumingly smart, and a sense of humor that cut just enough to make you feel like you didn’t have to be perfect in her company. There was also this undercurrent of longing in her. She had a need, along with the effortless talent, to make people love her. Soon she was calling Frank her boyfriend and was planning to run away and live with him. He told her that if she ran away to live with him he would marry her later, after she turned eighteen. She told me not to tell anyone.

I wrote back and said, "*You’re dumb. Just wait until you are eighteen and get married—then go live with him. If he doesn’t want to wait to marry you, that means he’s a big fat jerk.*” Even I, at my inexperienced age, knew that it was sort of creepy that a twenty-five-year old man thought it was ok to ask a seventeen-year-old girl to run away and live with him. I was also worried about The Gray Ladies. I feared they would shrivel up with anxiety if Azul disappeared without a word.

Azul wrote me back, telling me I was right. She would wait until she was eighteen.

After that she stopped writing. I kept writing, growing increasingly full of annoyance at her lack of response. I thought about calling The Gray Ladies’ house, despite the long distance charges, but decided if Azul was going to just forget me, then I’d do my best to forget her too. Apparently she was too busy being called *baby girl* by stupid Frank to bother and write me back. I wasn’t invited to come stay with her that summer.
My dad fell out of love with the Barracuda and gave it to me, which felt kind of like receiving a curse. By this time the driver’s seat was ripped and it had a strange stale french-fry/wet dog smell ... and it didn’t run. My parents bought a bright yellow Chevy station wagon as its replacement. My brother refused my father’s attempt to bequeath the Barracuda upon him. He got a job and bought a 1954 Chevy Bel Air that actually ran, but wept oil all over the driveway.

My dad pulled the engine on the destitute Barracuda and I helped him to overhaul it. It was just as tortuous an experience as riding in in the hatchback had been. We did get it running. I drove it and got a job at Chicken Queen.

I finally got a letter from Azul. At first I didn’t realize it was from her—my name and address were stiffly printed, and not in her normal, pretty cursive. She didn’t put her name above the return address. The return address was not The Gray Ladies’.

"I lied in my last letter," she wrote. "I was mad that you thought running away with Frank would be dumb. I was mad you said he was a jerk. But you were right. I’m dumb and he is a jerk."

She had run away with Frank. This of course made me angry, and not just at Azul for not telling me. I was also angry with my parents. There was no way they hadn’t been told Azul had run away—but they had kept it from me. I suppose this was because of the way I acted when Charlie wasn’t given back to us.

As I read Azul’s perfect, looping longhand I stopped being mad. I started being worried. She wrote that living with Frank was wonderful at first. He bought her nice clothes and said she
didn’t have to go to school anymore and they went dancing nearly every weekend. She rode a horse and worked the cattle with him and loved it.

"But one day," she wrote, "I spoke Spanish to Andres, Frank's hired hand, in front of Frank. English was hard for Andres and he liked talking with somebody who knew Spanish. Frank went nuts. He accused me of being a slut and asked me if I was sleeping with that 'dirty spic.' I got mad back. I told him he was a big fat redneck asshole who should keep his big fat redneck mouth shut. He slapped me so hard that it made the inside of my cheek bleed and my eye swell shut."

Her pretty handwriting became more like a scrawl as she continued. "The next day he was all nicey nicey again. He told me he was sorry and asked me to forgive him. But he fired Andres and hid the keys to the truck."

When she asked for the keys and some money to go get milk and eggs he yelled at her, telling her the only time she was allowed to leave the ranch was with him.

"I'm stuck here," she wrote. "His place is in the middle of nowhere. He unhooked the phone from the wall and hid it. I'm hoping he won't miss the stamp the next time he pays bills. He doesn't like walking down to the mailbox so I get the mail. I guess he's too stupid to think I'd write a letter—probably because he can't spell and writes like a second grader. I don't know what to do. I'll figure something out though. I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. I'm sorry I stopped writing. Don't tell your mom and dad or The Gray Ladies. I'm not sure what stupid Frank would do if they showed up. He has a gun. Please don't tell anyone. I don't want the cops coming for me. Pretty sure they lock runaway foster kids in juvenile hall. I'll be ok
until I figure something out. I'll just make Frank believe I love him. I hope you get this letter. I miss you, Azul."

I remember thinking, 'What the heck? She writes me and tells me she’s in trouble and then wants me to do nothing?'

I believed her fear of ending up in Juvenal Hall was valid, although I didn’t understand why that would be worse than faking love for abusive Frank. Maybe it would’ve been worse. Maybe it would’ve been like trading one kind of confinement for another. I had seen the illogic of the 'authorities' first hand. I knew was that there was a baby we had loved whose 'real' family had nearly starved him to death, but the 'authorities' wouldn’t give him back to us because we were too 'attached.' I had this vision of Azul behind a locked door surrounded by razor wire and cruel inmates. I pictured the police arriving to take her from Frank and a shootout in which Azul was the one who ended up dead.

I made a plan. I wasn’t sure how long it would take my letter to reach her, but I estimated three days and added an extra day for good measure. I found a map and studied it. Fortunately I inherited my mother’s navigation skills and not my father’s lack of them. I filled the Barracuda’s gas tank. I asked off from work for Saturday. I waited.

After dinner on Friday I lied to my parents and told them I was spending the night with my friend Lori—that we were going to spend Saturday riding horses. I got in the Barracuda and headed out in search of Frank’s ranch.

It didn’t take me long to realize that I was nuts. Finding a ranch in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night seemed impossible. Dark gravel roads, hard to see tiny signs, and crappy headlights made it pretty easy to get lost.
I started to panic. What if I couldn’t find the ranch? What if Azul hadn’t even received my letter? Or, what if Frank checked the mailbox first and had found it? What if he was waiting for me instead of Azul? I pictured him holding a sawed-off shotgun with a wad of tobacco making his lower lip swell out. He’d shoot me and then spit a long stream of brown liquid into the dirt to mingle with the blood oozing from my dead body.

When I found a white mailbox with the right address poking out from the side of a gravel road, I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or scared. A shadow separated from a row of trees that grew along the fence line and I gripped the wheel, ready to hit the accelerator if the apparition wore a cowboy hat. I had the triangle window open and heard a voice.

"Turn off the lights!"

I quickly switched the headlights off as Azul yanked open the passenger door and threw a duffle bag into the back seat. "I thought you weren’t coming. Go!" Her voice was shaky and hollow sounding. She clutched at the dash and looked in the direction of a house lit by a pole light at the end of a long drive.

I whipped the Barracuda around, throwing gravel up behind as I hit the gas pedal. I leaned over the wheel, peering into the starlit dark trying to keep the car on the road. When I glanced in the rearview mirror I saw headlights coming down the long driveway. A pickup truck swerved onto the road behind us. I switched on the Barracuda’s lights and pushed the accelerator to the floor. The overhauled commando v8 engine shot the Barracuda down the gravel road at a speed I felt very uncomfortable with.

I fishtailed onto a paved county road and the Barracuda’s tires squealed then got some grip and leapt forward full of joy at its unrestrained launch towards civilization. By the time the
pickup could have reached the turn I had already swerved onto a different road. I made another turn, and then another and became thoroughly lost—but I had also lost Frank.

The new road was a smooth, straight blacktop and, for a time, I let the Barracuda go as fast as she wanted before slowing to reasonable speed. When I glanced over at Azul, even in the dim light from the dash, I could tell she was different—thinner, her arms stick-like, one side of her face puffy. It felt like a stranger was sitting in the passenger seat.

When she turned and smiled her familiar Azul-smile at me, the stranger disappeared. “Hi, Carrot Cake,” she said.

“Hola, Azul,” I said back, thinking how good it felt to say her name again.

“So ... the Barracuda is still alive?”

“Resurrected from the dead.”

“I’m so glad,” she said, her voice vague, distracted.

She was silent for a time and my tongue was tied by that awkward brain freeze you get when you haven’t seen someone in a long time.

She broke the weird silence by asking, “Why aren’t you wearing your green bikini?”

I laughed. “Wouldn’t fit. I have bigger boobs now.”

“Good thing. They looked like mosquito bites when we went to Mexico City.”

“Very true,” I agreed.

“Where are we going?” Azul asked.

“Home,” I told her.
“Think your parents will be ok with that?”

“Yeah. Between my parents and The Gray Ladies we’ll figure it out.” The words just came out of my mouth without me even thinking about it. I felt relieved, because I was sure I was right.

We were silent for a while—but this time it was a familiar comfortable silence. Nothing but empty black road stretched behind us. Eventually she crawled over the seats to lie down in the hatchback.

“I see the Big Dipper,” she called up to me.

“And the North Star?”

“Yes. How long does it take for the light to get here?”

“Six hundred eighty years,” I reminded her.

“I kind of always liked the Barracuda,” Azul confessed. “I know you always hated it.”

“No,” I replied, surprised at myself, “I don’t hate it. How could anyone hate a car with 14.4 square feet of glass covering the hatchback and a commando V8 engine?”

Azul chuckled then was quiet again. I thought she had fallen asleep.

“Thanks for coming and getting me, Carrot Cake,” she said after a while. Her voice sounded like she had been crying.

I didn’t trust myself to reply. I felt like crying too. Then I laughed out loud at the stupidity of feeling like crying, because, even though I was lost and in the belly of a glassy-eyed fish, I was exactly where I wanted to be and happier than I had been in a long time.
Azul never asked me why I had laughed when she thanked me for coming and getting her that night. She knows that I often laugh when I shouldn't.