

## RESCUE

The little carnival sparkles in the morning sun, only shabby where it doesn't show. A Ferris Wheel, a carousel, some kiddie rides, a few tents, all unloaded before dawn and set up on a grassy field across the road from a beach. Much better than last week when they were in a church parking lot with no shade and nothing to do on break. Three o'clock to four o'clock is Azure's only hour away from the show.

Azure sometimes sells fried dough but mostly she runs the baby boats and that's what she's doing today. Loading, unloading, buckling, unbuckling. Three in a boat. No hands in the water. Parents *outside* the fence. Azure looks older than eleven, a big girl with tired eyes and stringy hair. Her mother is a Main Attraction, a freak, with her own tent, separate admission and a hand-painted sign.

*Marabella!*

*The Fattest Woman in the World!*

*Takes Four Men to Hug Her, a Boxcar to Lug Her!*

A boxcar would be better than the tiny trailer they live in, parked in the back of the lot. Marabella can barely turn around in there. Azure is only fat enough to be invisible and has no

desire to follow in her mother's footsteps. She wants to win a makeover and be a movie star, even though she knows Hollywood California is nowhere near anywhere they ever happen to be.

Early June and it's hot and steamy and packed like August, all of them yelling and laughing and spending big. Ice cream and sno-cones going like hotcakes, a boisterous line for the baby boats. Azure works non-stop, squinting in the glare. The heat and noise and dust are constant, everything in motion but the clock.

"No hands in the water!" she yells again and again. They don't listen so she finally stops telling them. Soon they've splashed so much water out of the tank anyone can clearly see the revolving track underneath and see the boats aren't actually floating at all. If three o'clock ever comes, she's going to sit on the beach and watch what she wants to watch without having to do anything about it. She's never seen an ocean up close.

At exactly three o'clock Azure unloads, shuts down, hangs the chain and flips the sign. On her way off the lot she grabs a warm fried dough with extra sugar, the biggest on the counter, no charge of course, and eats it as she waits to cross the road. Cars pass in an unseeing stream until she puts up her hand like a cop and steps off the curb. She doesn't have all day. An hour is two hundred kids on and off the baby boats. At the beach it will be harder to tell. Last week she lost track of time in a comic book store with a clock right there on the wall. Ten minutes late and they docked her the whole hour. She glares at the driver who stopped for her and trudges across the street licking sugar off her fingers.

The beach is a bright mass of colorful umbrellas and blankets, the ocean even brighter. Families are set up for the day with coolers and magazines, big blow up turtles and whales. Ribs in a bucket, jugs of lemonade. Mothers and fathers and babies, grandmothers and grandfathers

and who knows who all. Azure can hardly squeeze through without stepping on someone's blanket or bumping someone's folding chair. Nearly poking her eye out on a beach umbrella.

She walks until the jangly carnival music is out of earshot, then finds a spot of sand and sits down, half-in, half-out of the water. She's wearing shorts and a flowered tank top but can't imagine going in further even if she were wearing a bathing suit which she isn't and wouldn't and can't swim anyway.

Frosty little waves spill over her feet and ankles up to her knees then slide out, drawing her heels deeper in the wet sand. The sun is behind her, out of her eyes at last. Everything looks sharp and clean. Blue water, blue sky. Bright white sails on the horizon, the zigzaggy spray of a jet ski closer to shore. Real boats.

Azure picks up some little pink shells and lines them up across her thighs, arranging and rearranging them like jewelry. She has an artistic eye. When the Sword Swallower skipped town, they let her re-paint his sign. Dark brown first to cover, then GIANT RATS! in yellow capital letters. And they let her take her time. She tucks her pale hair behind her ears. Her ears are her best feature she feels, delicate and close to her head.

She tastes her salty fingertips and watches two boys fill their plastic pails with damp sand, voices muted by the offshore breeze. They pack down the sand with their little shovels then carefully turn the pails upside down, lift them off and smash the pail-shaped towers. Over and over and over. The boys are slick with sunscreen and their mothers leap up if they venture deeper than their ankles. Nobody notices Azure.

And nobody's wearing a watch, not one she can read without getting up anyway. Ten minutes gone so far, she figures. If only you could stop time altogether. Step right up! Hurry,

hurry, hurry! See Time Stand Still! Check your watches, ladies and gents. The hands do not move! Seeing is believing! She'd make a killing if she could work that racket.

Somewhere in the distance a siren wails. Whenever Azure hears a siren, she likes to think the police are coming to rescue her, coming to return her to her real parents who are rich and wonderful and never stop searching for her and probably live in Hollywood. This might be the town they find her, a nice town with nice families. A beach and trees, flowers instead of broken bottles in the grass. She hears the siren again. Handsome policeman maybe, a nice police lady. She picks out the most nearly perfect pink shells, brushes the rest off her thighs, and waits.

A seagull drags a shred of cotton candy through the sand. A freckled teenager in a tiny blue two-piece rolls over on her towel and reaches for a book. Azure decides to wear a two-piece like that when she lives in Hollywood, maybe in red. Whenever Azure sees a pretty girl, she pictures her face in a mugboard. Olive Oyl or the bald old Queen of England. Or if she's very pretty, the tipsy cow with huge pink udder. If that girl comes over to the show with her friends later, Azure will get one of the guys to pull key to the Midway on her.

She's close enough to read the blocky letters on the other girl's book. Algebra One. Azure passed Algebra a year ago. Not in actual school, she's never in one place long enough, but Marabella is making her read through the encyclopedias stacked under the bunk in their trailer. Azure's in Book Three of twelve not counting the index. Algebra was in Book One, where she also learned her name is the blue of a perfectly clear sky as well as a semi-precious stone, which she prefers.

Marabella says she reads too slowly.

"A to Zed before you turn fifteen," she warns and threatens to leave Azure on the doorstep of some school out in the highgrass if she doesn't. Azure's not so sure that would be a bad thing and doubts she'll ever find out what a zed is either way. She's only as far as Fiji and hasn't looked ahead, except to peek at Hollywood in Book Four.

Her father sold encyclopedias, left a set behind when he moved on to pots and pans which were more lucrative and got him into more houses where the husband wasn't home.

"Encyclopedias go out of date," he told Azure the last time she saw him. "Pots and pans only dent." He said to look him up if the carnival ever came through a town where he might be working. Even at six years old Azure knew that wasn't enough information.

The ocean flashes with a million tiny lights. The boats sail right through. If she could make time stop, Azure would strand herself right here. On break, on this beach, the carnival far enough behind. She'll never make it to Hollywood anyway.

As she reorganizes her pink shells by size, the sirens wail again, closer now. She turns to look. Two fire engines and an ambulance come screaming around the corner and to her surprise, turn sharply and race across the field to the carnival. She puts the shells in her pocket, hauls herself up off the wet sand and maneuvers back through the umbrellas up to the road.

Right away she can tell the Ferris Wheel is turning much too fast. They aren't coming for her. No need to cross the road. The engines stop abruptly at the base of the Wheel. She scrambles up on the concrete wall above the beach to watch. Sand prickles the backs of her legs. She hears shouting. There's a crowd under the Ferris Wheel. People come from the beach and gather at the wall with her, even the girl in the blue two-piece. They don't cross the street, all their stuff is on the beach.

Then suddenly the music stops and all the rides go dark like somebody pulled a big plug. The seats on the Ferris Wheel jerk then rock in place. Riders near the bottom slide from their seats and hop off. The ones further up scramble down through the struts and jump to the ground. Parents yell at kids in the highest seats to sit still.

When the ladder on the fire truck starts to lift and lengthen, both sides of the street go silent. The ladder extends taller and taller then tips gradually sideways to lean against the Ferris Wheel. Immediately an orange-suited man with a rope over his shoulder starts up the ladder.

This is all very interesting to Azure. Nothing much happens in the carnival. One of the snakes escaped once and they had to reveal it was de-fanged. The boy who brought it back alive got free rides all afternoon. Another time, a farmer found a cockroach in his cotton candy but luckily, since it turned out he was also the mayor, it was closing night. They dropped awning and were gone well ahead of the morning paper.

Azure can make out a few carnies bustling around under the Wheel. Somebody's in big trouble. Not her. And her late shift will never start on time. She picks at a scab on her arm and watches as one after another of the remaining riders is helped down the ladder until there's only one left. A blonde kid in pink shorts and pink sneakers in the very top seat. Five or six years old and bawling like a baby.

Azure hasn't cried since she was three. A good whack on the backside takes care of that, as Marabella advises parents of crying children, even though the children are apt to be crying because Marabella is scowling at them, her eyes pale dots in the terrifying folds of flesh. Marabella gives everyone their money's worth.

"My baby! My baby!"

A distraught voice carries clear across the road and Azure sees a woman racing back and forth under the Ferris Wheel. The fireman is on the very top step of the ladder now. He reaches for the girl but she shrinks away and when her seat rocks she wails even louder. The fireman grasps the frame of the Wheel with both hands and steps cautiously from the ladder to a support cable. As he inches closer, the child screams "No, no, no!" at the top of her lungs.

Other firemen unfold a net below. The crowd presses in. Some grip their hands in prayer; some cover their mouths in fear. Everyone holds their breath. Azure can't believe the fuss. The girl is not in danger. Azure has a King Kong poster over her bunk in the trailer and likes to imagine she's the blonde in the gorilla's huge paw. That's danger.

The fireman reaches the little girl's seat and clammers quickly over the bar. As he slides in beside her, his big hat falls off and bumps down to the ground. The crowd gasps. The screeching woman tries to climb the fire truck. Azure spots Marabella, big as a house in her red-striped dress, head back and mouth wide open, staring straight up like everyone else.

Then the screaming stops. The fireman has the girl. He slings her over his shoulder like a sack of beans and backs down the ladder. Two men in white rush to meet them with a stretcher and the crowd closes around them.

Moments later they emerge to loud cheers and Azure can see the girl lying small and still on the stretcher holding a huge bunch of pink balloons and the giant blue frog. The impossible-to-win prize, a perfectly good piece of flash just so they won't have to leave in the middle of the night.

Azure is disgusted. She slides off the wall with a little grunt and adjusts the back of her shorts. Her shoulders are hot to the touch, her thighs bright pink. The ambulance drives by with no siren this time. A police car comes from the other direction and pulls onto the field. Two cops emerge and prowl around under the Ferris Wheel, shining their flashlights up into the Wheel and all over the ground beneath even though it's daylight.

The music starts and the merry-go-round begins to turn but the crowd is already streaming away from the carnival, parents clutching their children's hands as they go. The girl in the blue bathing suit returns to her spot on the beach and reapplies suntan lotion.

Azure pulls the pink shells from her pocket and drops them on the wall. Her break never comes fast enough then it's gone too fast. She trudges back across the road and cuts through the field heading for her late shift. If there is a late shift tonight. If not, she'll be back in the trailer, bumping along some back road to nowhere with the Fattest Woman in the World. Maybe the next town will be the town they find her.