

Marty

Julia Spratt

The Malibu

The summer before my 8th grade year, I was homeless. Well, to be more accurate, my home was a 2004 Chevy Malibu crammed full of everything my mother and I could fit in it in the hour we had after getting kicked out of my grandparents' home. Full of uncertainty and fear, we spent three months hopping from one city to the next, traversing the wilds of Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, my mother taking odd jobs that lasted mere days or weeks. We occasionally had enough money to stay in a hotel, and I would have to hide my cat, Kiko, under the folds of a blanket in order to sneak her in. She, the cat, wasn't a fan of such treatment, but I generally credit her current The Dude-like zen attitude to the trauma of those months.

What's so strange about our time in the Malibu is that I never attribute it as a bad time in my life. Looking back, I was terrified, clinging to my mother like she was the last person on earth. I guess she kind of was at that point, disregarding the feline partner-in-crime curled in a ball on the dashboard. But some of my favorite memories of my mom come from that summer: hitting golf balls off the top of a dinky little Missouri motel, spending hours talking about our family and dreams of the future, singing along to Natasha Bedingfield's "Pocketful of Sunshine" as it came on for the tenth time in 4 hours as we sat in less-than-a-foot-an-hour traffic in the blistering summer heat. The Malibu, I will note, did not have air conditioning.

I learned more about my mother in those three months than I have ever gathered since. I learned her history, her motivations, her secrets. Over the course of that summer, as I distracted myself with counting clouds and figuring out exactly how much change we had left for McDonald's, I allowed myself to meet my mother, experience her, learn from her, learn about her, in a way I've never been able to replicate.

Those three months, the crux of our lives, were simultaneously the worst and best of my life, stuffed away with my mother and a cat, trotting along in that tiny little 2004 four-door.

The Spark

I have never been a “car person.” I understand their necessity and can appreciate their design and color schemes. I can even find comfort in their accessories and low mileage rates, but I have never changed a tire. The underside of a vehicle is a maze I’ll never find my way around. If I’m being completely transparent, I don’t have the faintest idea what the V in V8 stands for, let alone the 8.

And yet when recently asked what my most valuable item was, I answered, “my car.”

And let me tell you, my car is nothing to write home about. Marty (named after the quintessential teenage heartthrob Marty McFly) is a 2014 Chevy Spark, baby blue with only three cup holders and manual door locks. He does have an automatic lock, but it’s for the trunk... for some reason. He does not have cruise control, which makes cross-state trips to visit the family absolutely miserable, and there’s no place to plug in an aux cord so you’re stuck listening to the radio (no CD or cassette player to be found). His horn sounds like a cat meow, his trunk is less than spacious, and he wobbles on the highway if the wind is blowing too hard.

But he’s mine. All mine.

Coming from a poor family who had the power turned off on multiple occasions, I was never going to get a car for my Sweet 16 or as a graduation present. Hell, I rarely was trusted with the family minivan because we were so desperately reliant on it and my mother was worried I would send it careening into a lake. But Marty, he’s all mine. It was my sweat, my tears, my time, my effort and determination that got him off that lot. No one else’s.

Some would say I have an unhealthy relationship with Marty. I often talk directly to him while driving, and at least once a week I tell him how handsome he is as I lovingly pat his dashboard. With a husband allergic to dogs, he’s probably the closest thing I’ll ever get to owning a pooch, and just like a canine companion he rewards my affection with unbridled loyalty and looking like the cutest little thing on the planet.

The Focus

Last month I married a man who drives a 2013 Ford Focus. Black, with heated seats and cruise control. Its hatchback is great for storage, we can remotely start it from our apartment on cold

winter mornings, and it's got cup holders galore. It's a comfort car—nice size, nice mileage, nice radio. We didn't have to pay for it either - the perks of a wealthy father-in-law. When I picture it, I picture my husband lounging back in his heated seat, left hand gently gripping the steering wheel, right hand interlaced with mine. He's listening to some folk song or a favorite podcast, casually navigating the twists and turns of Indianapolis traffic.

But when I look forward, when I imagine what would happen in a personal apocalypse, if I found myself at my lowest point, without money, without a home, I don't imagine the comfort of that 2014 Ford Focus. I imagine my tiny Chevy Spark, baby blue and smelling like thunderstorms. I imagine finding my way, surviving, and I imagine I'm alone.