

TINY INFINITIES

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To Jackson, Sandy, and Caroline

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*The fireflies, twinkling among leaves,
make the stars wonder.*

—Rabindranath Tagore



PROLOGUE

BACKSTROKE

HARRIET SAYS I am a backstroker at heart, which is true. I have won more medals for freestyle than backstroke, but when I am swimming on my back, counting strokes while my arms pull down the pool, I am racing but relaxed. Fierce but smooth. I am as sure as there is dry air above my face that once I slide under the blue-and-white flags at Cherrywood Pool I'll need five more strokes to touch the wall. Flags—five strokes—the wall. Every time. What I love most about backstroke is, it proves a person doesn't need to be looking straight ahead to know exactly where she's going.

1

PIPER



HEADLIGHTS WOKE ME: shining down the path through the bamboo forest, between the upper and lower parking lots at Cherrywood Pool. Luckily the glare didn't reach the bench where I'd fallen asleep. Like a tide that rolls up a beach and drops back short, leaving your towel dry, white light flooded one end of the walk but kept me in darkness. I slipped to the ground, hugged my swim bag to my chest, and squeezed in among the tall, gray-green bamboo poles. I was cold. My Sharks team suit, T-shirt, and shorts were still damp, and the air temperature had dropped. I didn't remember falling asleep, but I remembered not wanting to go home after swim practice and not knowing where else to go to avoid watching my dad move out.

A car door opened. Loud static clipped on and off from a radio. The words were too fuzzy to make out, but

the cloudy syllables said clearly: *police cruiser*. According to older kids on the team, high-schoolers liked to party here. So I waited for the police to decide there were no teenagers and leave.

The trouble teenagers could get into—the kind police might be looking for—was about as unclear in my head at that point as the sounds of the radio, even though I was going to turn into a teenager in only two weeks, the day after school got out, in mid-June. All I cared about now was to avoid people and questions keeping me from carrying out the plan I'd come up with. People I knew, who'd say, "Alice, what are you doing alone at the pool in the middle of the night?" And people I didn't, who'd ask the same thing. Especially police, who—of course—would make me go home.

Each burst from the radio, the dark air absorbed like a sponge. This went on a couple of minutes. Burst and sponge. Burst and . . . sponge. Finally the volume turned down or maybe off, and I imagined they were listening from the car.

New sounds seemed to rise up to fill in the quiet: a hum from the eight-lane Washington, D.C., Beltway bordering the pool property, below a steep hill; a pulse of crickets chorusing nearer—an uneasy, uneven insect music that played the mood I was in better than I could have answered what it was in words—and footsteps.

Someone got out of the car without closing the door.

Swimming trains you to discipline your breathing and enlarges your lung capacity. I controlled my inhales and exhales to make them silent while a flashlight beam waved over the bamboo. Then, carefully, I backed away from the bench. Deeper into the bamboo, down the slope toward the lower parking area, flattening myself as much as possible in the slim spaces between the poles.

A stump the size of a quarter pressed into my right cheek. The ground smelled of dust, dirt, and mold. I lay, mostly on top of dead peapod-shaped bamboo leaves, wondering two things: why were the bumps on your skin when you got cold called goose bumps—why goose and not chicken or swan or pigeon—and what if they found me? If I ended up home, if I had to witness my dad go, it felt like I'd a little be saying it was okay. And it was not. I didn't agree. I would not be present. I refused.

A few inches from my face, a firefly blinked its own tiny searchlight—greenish yet completely unconcerned with me. *Unk*—the door shut rudely. The engine rumbled on, and the car pulled around to the lower lot and stopped again. I sat up.

The flashlight reappeared through the deep screen of bamboo, pointing into the chain-link fence by the toddler pool. Someone I couldn't see shook the locked

pool house door, and a man called, “Hello? Anybody there? Hello?” in a voice performing a duty.

Thankfully, a few minutes later the car headed off down the access road into the neighborhood. Now I could sneak back in through the hole in the fence every kid on the team knew about—behind the big azalea near the snack bar—and spend what was left of the night sleeping on a lounge chair.

I circled the pool entrance, to the picnic area, and crawled through the fence, as easily as finding my way in my house blindfolded.

The outdoor clock, mounted on the back wall of the pool house, said 2:37. But the lounge chairs, where I’d planned to sleep, looked like a herd of creepy cows in shadows on the grass. The peeping crickets seemed to be passing signals back and forth about me, for unseen watchers. It was as if the air had filled up with spooks, even though I didn’t believe in ghosts or magic. Even though I knew I was alone.

The last thing I felt like doing was sleeping on one of those chairs.

The best way to get warm was to swim.

As fast as I could, I pulled off my T-shirt and shorts. Dove into the lap pool, sprinted a length to shed the feeling of being watched. I kept my eyes shut except once or twice to stay straight with the black lane lines

on the bottom of the pool, because I’d forgotten to put on my goggles.

After that I set a slow, even pace. I could do this steady freestyle stroke until dawn, I figured, like those people who swim the English Channel. And I did, for twenty minutes or so—until my left arm crashed on something hard in the middle of the pool. *Fwack*. Stinging.

I mashed the water. Pounded it to shove up a wall of liquid like a shield, raced in the opposite direction and threw myself out onto the cement deck. Grabbed my bag, ran to the roof overhang at the back of the pool house, only then turned around.

On the water floated a plastic mute swan. Life-guards set it in the pool to keep Canada geese away. How had I missed that?

Shivering and spooked, in the cold shadows of the pool house, it felt as if I’d crossed a portal away from the world I knew and needed to go back. I scrambled into my clothes, crawled under the azalea bush, and started running.

Two blocks from my house, while I was concentrating on keeping my flip-flops from slipping off my feet and my body ahead of spirits that weren’t following, I saw her.

A little girl in pink-and-white-striped pajamas. Alone, in the middle of the road, standing inside a

circle of light cast by a streetlamp, barefoot. A car was approaching.

I stopped a few yards away with such a jerk that my flip-flops smushed sideways under my heels, my toes burned, scraping pavement. “Hey, watch out!” I called. The nearby houses were dark. The front yards were empty. The girl ignored me.

The car’s headlights threw forward around us, and the girl’s gaze seemed to shift to the grass they illuminated on her left. The driver’s eyes might be on his phone, I knew, or the dials of his dashboard or a drink in the cup holder or out the side window.

All this I took in in a second or less, and in the same moment recognized her—from the transfixed look on her face, and her mess of shortish, blond-white curls—as a stranger I’d seen yesterday afternoon, in the backyard next door to mine.

Swimming teaches you how to dive without hesitation at the start of a race. Fast, I crossed the space between us, hooked my arm and hugged her close. She was easy to lift, light and bony. She didn’t protest, and we fell where I aimed, onto a patch of lawn above the curb at the far side of the street. Just in time, it sounded like, from the tire screech.

A porch light came on at the house next door.

“Sorry,” I said urgently, turning my face to hers. I couldn’t help thinking I had gone from attempting to escape ghosts I’d spooked myself with to saving a real little girl from an actual metal giant.

Her miniature nose, lips, cheekbones, and eyebrows seemed to have been outlined with a fine-tipped pen. She looked me in the eye with a blank expression I couldn’t make out.

“What were you— Are you all right?” I asked in my big-sister voice as her chest rose and fell gently, catching her breath.

“Don’t be scared,” I said. “I hope you’re not hurt.” She kept looking at me but made no sound. “Can you hear me? Do you speak English? *¿Habla usted inglés?*” I tried, hoping the Spanish I learned at school might work.

I don’t know if I expected an answer. “My name’s Alice,” I went on. “I live next door to you, I think. Your family just moved in, right? Did you see me waving at you yesterday? You pretended not to, but I thought you did. Can you give me a thumbs-up you’re okay?” I couldn’t seem to stop asking her questions.

Honestly, I didn’t need to be asking her anything. The grass-covered ground was soft. I was used to giving piggyback rides to Mike and Josh; I’d been in charge of games for twenty kids, watched them fall, cry, helped

them get up. I was fine and she probably was too, I was guessing, when the driver's door of the stopped car opened.

I'd been hoping the car would just go away. My swim bag where I'd dropped it was caught in the low eyebeams of a teal-colored sedan with a bash in the rear door and a PIZZA DELIGHT sign on top.

"Hello? You people all right?" called a man standing in the street with his hands in the pockets of his jeans. I couldn't say how old he was. Sounded like he was asking a question he didn't want to but had to, which is how I felt about answering. Had to, didn't want to, like I didn't want to be with this girl or on my way home. There were no other choices, though—no good ones. There was nowhere I wanted to be. Only places I didn't.

The light from the nearby house went off.

"Yes," I said.

He picked up my bag, laid it a few feet closer to us, in the gutter at the side of the road, then quickly raised his hands as if I'd pointed a gun at him. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "Just making sure everybody is okay. You girls are very late to be outside." He lowered his arms and took a step closer. "Is she hurt?"

I stood, to make it easier to run if I had to. The girl scrambled up and started to move away, to the

darkened yard. "Thank you. It's my cousin who's visiting. She sleepwalks. I'm taking her back to my house," I said quickly, feeling all at once responsible for getting her home.

"Close one." He shook his head as if he was watching an instant replay of the near miss, like he hadn't been involved.

"We live right down there." I pointed vaguely toward where he'd come from. "My parents will be out in a minute to help us," I threw in. *Just leave*, I pleaded silently.

"Well, if you're sure you're okay," he said, "I can watch until your people come or you get into the house . . . but where is she going?" The girl was marching across the grass, away from us.

"It may take me a few minutes," I said, not sure what I meant. But he seemed to buy it. He gave a little formal nod and returned to his driver's seat. I don't know who was more relieved, him or me. I paused just long enough to watch him draw out his phone to look at it. Then I picked up my bag.



I found her at a corner house lot, on the part of the lawn by the other street, where it was darker. She was

sitting near a small, new-planted tree, with stakes and wires attached to hold it in place. I reached for her right hand to pull her up to walk home, without realizing it repeating what the man had said: “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Eeeyee-eeeee-Eeeeyyyyy!” she yelped. My heart jumped a mile, and I felt a thin wetness in the web of skin between her fourth and fifth fingers. Blood.

I whipped off the T-shirt covering my swimsuit, to wrap her wound, but she curled her small body around her hand and refused to let me touch it. My fingers were smeared with blood now, too; I hadn’t noticed any on her before, though I remembered she’d been lying on that hand when we fell to the ground.

Now she was clutching it to her stomach and lay kicking the air like a bug on its back. “Eeeeeem-raaer-eeeyeee!” she cried, loud enough for lights to come on and neighbors to rush over. I thought so, anyway, but maybe they mistook her for a cat or a coyote, because no one appeared.

All I could think of was a trick that worked with my brothers. I lay down and imitated her. “Ahhhhh,” I whisper-yelled, and kicked and waved my legs. If anyone came out now, they’d probably go right back, I thought, that’s how crazy we looked. But she did stop; her body quit moving, and she shut her eyes.

“Listen,” I said, sitting up on my elbow. “I’m really sorry about your hand. I can wrap it up. Like this—” I folded the shirt around one of my hands and made a thumbs-up with the other. “It’ll feel better.”

She didn’t start yelling again, but she didn’t open her eyes.

“This is maybe a stupid question,” I said, “but I’m wondering if you hear me talking, or if you might be . . . deaf?” Probably she was too little to even know that word, I thought. She looked about four. What else could explain the car or her sounds, and no reaction, now, to mine? I wished I knew sign language.

“If you do hear me”—super-stubborn was a possibility, I decided, or super-scared or both—“could you just say your name? Or show fingers for how old you are? I’m almost this many.” I held up ten fingers and then three more above our faces against the night sky. Her eyes stayed closed.

Well, that was enough chitchatting. With some struggle, because she squealed and kicked, I managed to wrap her like a burrito in my wet towel while keeping the part around her right hand as loose as I could. I clutched her in front of me like a wriggly worm, my bag slung over one shoulder. It was awkward. But I intended to finish this night with at least one thing done right.

In the first block, I had to stop to re-grip a couple of times while she squirmed. By the second block, she seemed to have accepted the ride. But I slowed down as we neared my house. A police car was parked in front, and there were lights in the living room windows.



If I hadn't been carrying a large bleeding package that was likely to run off or scream when I set it down, maybe I would have snuck around to the back. Instead, I rang the bell with my elbow. My dad opened our front door with an expression on his face that morphed from bleached surprise to relief. "Oh thank God!" Two police officers behind him immediately started tapping numbers into their phones.

"But Alice, you're covered in blood! And who's this? Is she hurt, are you hurt? What happened?" He attempted a hug, as if he needed to make sure I was real. But the towel bundle was already slithering out of my arms, and I slipped from his. "You're wet. You were at the pool?"

"I'm fine," I said, bandaging up, for the moment, the raw awfulness of being home—with my plan failed and him about to leave. Because of course this girl needed actual bandaging, and as soon as possible. "That's hers,

from carrying her," I added about the blood on my arms and T-shirt.

She had pushed off my swim towel and was sitting on our wood hallway floor, cradling her right hand between her stomach and knees.

"That new family moved in at Mr. Salgado's, and she was in his yard yesterday. I don't know her." I didn't answer about the pool. "Is Mom upstairs?" Nobody answered me either.

"Hi there, I'm Officer Gina." The woman's black gun stuck out at her hip as she squatted to eye level with the girl. As much as I'd been determined to do the right thing and bring her home, I couldn't help feeling mad that I'd had to. I'd ended up exactly where I didn't want to be.

Officer Gina was small and compact, while her partner was practically double her size and much younger. He'd rushed out to their cruiser and was coming back in the door with a large white box with a red cross on it, which he held open for her. Officer Gina was clearly in charge.

"Officer David and I are going to get you home safe to your family," she said. "We want to make your owie feel better. Show me that hand."

No surprise to me, the girl did not respond. "I forgot to mention, I think she might have a hearing problem,"

I said. “She was in the middle of the road, just now, by herself, at Summit and Oak.” I left out why I also happened to be there. “She almost got hit by a car. It seemed like she didn’t hear it. I had to grab her out of the way.”

“Got it.” Officer Gina nodded as if I’d given her helpful information. “Kiddo?” She patted the girl’s knee. What a mistake. The girl leapt at the door, like a squirrel flying from the ground to a branch, and yanked the knob with her good hand.

Officer David reached over to flip the deadbolt. “Let’s not try that—Hey! Whoa!”

Wham. Wham. She banged her head on the door. Like she wanted to crack it to make more blood come out. *Wham. Wham.*

“Take it easy, there!” Officer Gina said.

Words were pointless, so I jumped up and squatted by her to try the trick again: moving parallel, pretending to hit my head on the door, too. It worked. The girl stopped, eyeing me suspiciously. Yes.

“Oh my God,” I heard my dad mutter. I couldn’t tell if he meant he was annoyed or amazed.

She sank back to sitting, her injured hand behind her knees.

“Good grief,” said Officer Gina. “Which side are they on?” Meaning the new neighbors.

Dad pointed an index finger toward Mr. Salgado’s. The look on his face reminded me of a balloon after you’ve blown it up almost too far and then let the air out, when the rubber gets stretched thinner than it’s supposed to. Officer Gina was smart, I thought, watching her leave by the back door in our kitchen.

“Can I borrow some gauze?” I asked Officer David. He frowned as soon as I started winding the bandage around my own hand.

“See? This is what they want to do.” I held my wrapped hand out in front of her face. She shut her eyes.

Someone pounded outside the door then, and the girl startled me by standing up when I did. By now I very much doubted she was just pretending to be deaf. But was she imitating me, like I had with her, or something else? Maybe she felt vibrations through the wood door?

Officer David had barely unlocked the door when it shoved open a few inches, and the girl started to squeeze out. A man wearing sweatpants and no shirt scooped her up into his arms. “Piper!” Finally she had a name.

He was taller, balder, and younger than my dad. Obviously Officer Gina had told him about the hand because he looked at it and me and demanded, “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing, I—” I realized that my shirt had blood on it, and I hadn’t washed the smears off my arms and hands. My appearance must have looked not exactly innocent.

“Mr. Phoebe, let’s step into the living room to continue this conversation,” interrupted Officer Gina. “It’s too cramped for all of us here.” Our front hall was a narrow rectangle between the door and the kitchen, with an arched opening to the living room at the side.

But Mr. Phoebe, whose hearing seemed fine, ignored Officer Gina and started trying to pry open the fingers of Piper’s injured hand. She let out another one of those jungle animal sounds that would have woken up my brothers if they hadn’t already moved to our cousin Guy’s house.

“Piper!” Mr. Phoebe lifted her above his head, trying to catch her eye. “Will you stop!” She was kicking the air like a wild version of exercises the swim coach sometimes had us do on land, bicycling our legs. When Mr. Phoebe quit trying and lowered her into a hug in his arms, then she did stop.

“I’m sorry. She doesn’t hear me.” He glanced nervously at the police officers and gently rubbed Piper’s back to console her. “It’s sometimes beyond . . . frustrating.”

My dad stepped forward. “I’m Sam Allyn,” he said in the voice he used these days to talk to my mom, filled with disapproval. “My daughter, Alice, found your daughter wandering in the street.”

“I understand that’s what she says,” replied Mr. Phoebe, whose expression changed quickly to a stuck-up smile, as if he was used to being lied to. He turned to me. “How did her hand get hurt?” he asked in that same tone, like he was too smart to believe my answer. “How long was she with you, anyway?”

“You must be Mom,” Officer Gina called over his shoulder, to a woman in pajamas and slippers who’d appeared on our doorstep. This whole scene was so much crazier than I’d thought this stupid night was going to be.

“Hello, yes! Joanna Phoebe.” Behind her stood a teenage boy, and she carried a sleeping toddler with the same white-blond hair as Piper’s. Joanna Phoebe readjusted her load and shook the policewoman’s hand. “Thank goodness you found her! What a night. . . . Hello, hello there,” she added, greeting the rest of us.

The boy stayed outside the screen door, on the steps, with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans. He wore a black T-shirt that said in large pink letters, I AM SUSHI, YOU ARE SUSHI. I liked him right away

for that, and I wished he'd come in, too. He looked like he was in high school. Was that how teenage boys slept, in their jeans?

"We got lucky, didn't we Eric?" Joanna Phoebe beamed at her husband with happy relief. Seeing her, his smirk melted, his shoulders relaxed. Without another word between them, they swapped kids. He settled the toddler on his shoulder, and Piper, whimpering only a little, held out her hand. "Oh, darling, ouch."

I could see in Joanna's eyes she was more worried than her voice let on.

Officer Gina said, "I'm going to suggest you have her checked out at the nearest emergency room, in case she needs a stitch or two. For the record, does your daughter suffer from a disability?"

Joanna and her husband looked at each other again, and somehow between them agreed who would answer.

"She doesn't hear words," said Mr. Phoebe, nodding. "She does hear some sounds—birds, doorbells sometimes. But not people."

I knew it, I thought, pleased to confirm my near-perfect record of figuring out screaming little kids, thanks to Mike and Josh.

"She used to, didn't you, beautiful?" said Joanna, rubbing noses with Piper as she fixed a piece of tape on her hand.

"Right after our little guy, Timmy, was born." Mr. Phoebe patted the boy's back. "From a perfectly normal kid to—worse and worse." He shrugged, like he had no answer to a question. "Every doc has a different explanation."

Officer Gina was tapping notes on her tablet. "And you and your wife were where this evening?"

"The house," Mr. Phoebe said. "We moved in less than twelve hours ago. We were asleep when you rang the bell. No idea she could get out."

"How scary," Joanna said to Piper, who, her hand taped in gauze, had settled in her mom's arms. "Thank goodness you're safe." Joanna looked up at the officers. "We are so grateful for your help. I can't bear to think what might have happened."

"Well, it was Alice here who located your daughter . . .," Officer Gina began.

"And who we don't know anything about," Mr. Phoebe interrupted. "I'd like to be clear where things stand and if she's responsible for that injury."

"I am not!" I said, unable to listen to Mr. Phoebe any longer without getting mad. "She was almost hit by a car! She would have been, if I hadn't saved her! I'm sorry about her hand, but . . ." Didn't they understand, without me it would have been so much worse? I hated Mr. Phoebe, I thought.

“Alice, we’ll sort this out,” my dad said. “Calm down.”

“I didn’t see when her hand started bleeding,” I protested. “All I did was try to help her. And compared to what could have happened. She could have been hit by a car!”

Officer Gina raised her right palm, like she was directing traffic in the middle of an intersection. “Alice, give us a minute,” she said.

“Let’s let it go for now, Eric,” said Joanna. She looked nervous, a little worried he might not.

Officer David’s phone beeped, and he and Officer Gina stepped into the kitchen. My dad handed me a fleece shirt to put on. Mr. Phoebe shifted Timmy to his other shoulder.

“You know,” Joanna continued to her husband, “on our way over here, Owen showed me the back door was open, and it turns out the lock’s broken. That’s got to be how she got out.”

Owen. That was his name. He’d disappeared from the steps. Embarrassed, I opened our screen door, in case Owen was in the yard, to see if I could tell if he’d heard me. He wasn’t.

“Alice, where are you going?” my dad asked.

“Nowhere,” I said.

“But your hand’s hurt, too!” Joanna exclaimed.

“What? No. That’s—I was only showing Piper what they wanted to do to help her.” I waved my gauze-wrapped hand for her to see. This time Piper gave a little giggle at it.

“Joanna, it seems to me we need more answers from this girl,” said Mr. Phoebe. I stepped away from Piper, closer to my dad.

“Sir, the priority is medical attention for your daughter,” said Officer David, coming back in the room.

“We’ve got a car waiting out front. To show you the way to the nearest ER, since you’re new to the area,” Officer Gina said.

“And it’s late.” Joanna stood up to go, with Piper on her hip.

Mr. Phoebe glanced at my dad and me and said, “All right,” and walked out.

“Bye, it’s been way too exciting meeting you,” I told Piper, with another wave of my gauzed hand. “Hope you feel better.”

She turned her face into her mother’s chest, like a baby playing peekaboo, and Officer David followed after them. Joanna gave Dad a sympathetic smile.

He shut our front door, looking irritated and tired, as if he’d just put up with watching ten awful TV ads in a row, and now we were back to a show he didn’t

like anyway. “If you’ll excuse me a moment,” he said to Officer Gina, “I need to fill Alice’s mother in on the events. Triple A, as soon as you’re done here, go up and show Mom you’re all right, and then to bed. We’ll talk in the morning.”

The police officer resumed typing on her tablet. Usually my dad’s trips to visit my mom resulted in screaming or sobbing. It was eerily quiet. Officer Gina wouldn’t be here, I realized, if he hadn’t decided to move out and the Phoebes hadn’t decided to move in next door. I couldn’t help thinking what a waste of time it was, for so many people to go to so much trouble to pack up and switch the places where they lived. Why couldn’t we all have stayed right where we were?

Then Officer Gina looked up at me. “Alice, please come with me to the kitchen.” Her face was grave. “You and I need to chat.”

2

HARRIET



“AGE TWELVE. ALMOST THIRTEEN, I see,” Officer Gina read off her tablet.

The clock on the stove said 4:08. I sort of nodded-shrugged, nervous she was about to accuse me of something. I didn’t think it was a crime, though, to be outside at a pool even if you were supposed to be in bed. “I don’t know why Mr. Phoebe said it’s my fault. It was the opposite of what he thinks!”

There was a pause before she looked up. “Alice, I hear you. We’ll get to all that. First, help me out with a few details. Is it fair to say you came across our friend Miss Piper after you decided to return home from the pool?”

The mention of returning home, and her saying I decided to, thudded me, like Piper banging her head: I was back to where I started before I left for swim practice. Actually, given that I was being interrogated