

My Sister, A Girl

“Race you!” I say. Today I’m going to win, I can feel it.

Alice and I, dressed in our team swimsuits and “Eat My Bubbles” T-shirts, dash out of our house. We jump on our three-speeds and pedal toward the Sandpiper Swim Club, the shivery early-June morning air waking me all the way up. But Al is already ahead by the time we’re at the next door neighbor’s driveway. By the time Al gets to the oak at the end of the block, I’m two houses behind. I round the corner onto Sandpiper Lane and try to put on speed, but I’m trailing by nearly a quarter block when she gets to the bike racks.

“So, hotshot, where were you, again?” she says.

Enjoy it while you can, I think. Boys get stronger than girls. I wouldn’t dare say those words aloud. I’m not quite nine and Al is twelve and no one else is around, so those words would get me tackled and sat on.

Within ten minutes, a ton of other kids have biked or walked their way to the small brick clubhouse. Al and I are still shy, though, and haven’t made friends with them. We moved here to Bolingbrook, Illinois, a couple weeks ago when school let out, but before this, we lived out in the country in La Porte, Indiana. In La Porte, we sometimes played football and basketball with neighbor boys a year or two older than Al. But Al and I had the best times when no one else had asked us to play. We’d cook up our own fun, running around with our slingshots and cowboy pistols. Al has been my best friend since the day I was born. At least, that’s the way I think of it, and I think Al does too.

Coach arrives in his Beetle. He unlocks the clubhouse door, and Al goes left to the girls’

locker room and I go right, to the boys'. One time last year at our old pool, I looked up from where I lay on my beach towel and caught Al coming out the boys'. "I was just testing," she said, running her hands through her buzz cut. When I asked, "Testing what?," she laughed—the kind of laugh that means you don't really think it's funny—and said she sometimes she thinks she's a boy in girl's skin. She made me promise not to tell anyone, on pain of death. I told her it was okay, that I pretty much think of her as a boy. She smiled, and later that day she taught me how to throw a slider.

I line up in my lane and put on my goggles. Al is four lanes over, near the head of the fast lane. Al tells me I'll be a really good swimmer, because, for my size, I have a big rib cage and big hands and feet, like paddles. Al says she has small hands and feet and narrow shoulders. She worries about this. She wants to be an Olympic swimmer. She also wants to be a scientist and is serious about school. One night late last summer, I told her I'd like to be an archeologist—we were spending the family vacation looking for fossils in the river beds in Clarksville—but maybe I couldn't be, because I didn't want to work as hard at studying as she does. She said I'm a boy, I don't have to work as hard. She said this like she was mad at me. But then she smiled and punched my arm and said being an archeologist would be good, that you can correctly tell if a skeleton is male or female in no more than ninety per cent of the cases. She turned her face to the moon and said she was going to be an astronomer.

After swim practice there's "Free time," and we jump off the low and high boards and horse around. Al and I have made a game of treading water in the deep end and ducking under when a diver hits the water; we watch the bubbles and the diver come to the surface. She and I are like two smart fish at the side of a tank, and the other fish don't know we're spying on them.

An older boy does a one-and-a-half off the low, but he didn't have his ties tight and his

suit slips and we see his crack. Al and I laugh underwater. Al swims toward the deep end ladder, me following, and a girl hanging onto the ladder is laughing too. The girl puts her head to Al's and asks Al if she saw the guy. The girl says to Al that she's Jenny and she's thirteen. She asks if Al wants to come to her house.

I splash them. Al splashes back. Al says to Jenny, "That's my brother." She says it like she only puts up with me, but she throws me a smile over her shoulder. Jenny asks how old I am, and I say nine—even though it's going to be another three months. Jenny says she has a brother Jack who's ten. She says I can come to her house.

Al and I bike home and change into shorts. Al yells at Mom that we're going to friends' for breakfast. Mom says uh-huh, but I don't think she really heard, because she's watching TV while she cleans the house. That's her job, cleaning house and cooking meals and taking Al and me places. Al says that nowhere on her own birth certificate did she sign a contract to do housework and raise kids and she isn't going to. She says that at least the women on the soaps Mom watches are nurses, even if all they want is to marry a doctor—or maybe a patient who's been in a coma for months. Al says that if she has to get married, she'll marry a guy who's going to be in a coma forever.

Jenny's mom takes us to Dunkin' Donuts, and we kids eat a boxful. Jenny asks if we want to go to Roller-Rama, and we do. Jenny's mom gives us money to rent skates and drops us off. Al and Jenny go into the girls', for a long time. When they come out, Jenny is wearing red lipstick and blue eyeshadow. Al has faint traces of red on her lips.

Al and Jack and I have great fun on the rink, but Jenny sits on the grandstand in her shift dress and flutters her lashes at the older boys. One notices and comes sit with her. Al and Jack and I roll our eyes at each other, and Al scrubs her lips hard with her fingers.

Jenny's mom takes us home an hour or so later, and all Jenny can talk about during the drive is the boy she sat with. Al smiles—but it's one of those smiles you do for company; she's crossing Jenny off her list as a possible friend.

Al and I lunch on the back porch, though Al only eats half a baloney sandwich—says she's got a stomachache. Too many doughnuts, if you ask me. Al points down the block, to a backyard game of football. Al says we should ask if we can play, that maybe we'll find friends. The new boys shift from foot to foot and look at each other when Al asks if we can join, but then the biggest boy, a fourteen-year-old named Tom, says okay. Al and I get to be on the same side.

The game is going great. Al is proving she's no slouch--though our team gets mad when she laterals it to me a couple of times—I'm the smallest and slowest on our side. A while later, Al gets tackled. Like usual when someone gets tackled, we all pile on. But when Al gets to her feet, her face is tight and frowny, and I get a bad feeling in my chest. Tom talks low to some of the other boys, and they look at Al and snicker. Al runs toward home.

Tom put his hand up Al's shirt! I know it! I punch him in the stomach with everything I've got. Then I tear after Al. At home, I tell Al I won't ever play with those boys again. I tell her we'll find other friends, or just be friends ourselves. I ask if she wants to go to the pool.

She's still looking sad-like, but she's got chlorine for blood, so she can't say no. Going into the clubhouse ahead of us are our next-door neighbors, Mrs. Jambor and little Stevie. Little Stevie tugs at his mom's beach robe and points at Al and asks, "Can I play with him?"

Mrs. Jambor flashes us a smile, and I know she's thinking it's cute that her four-year-old doesn't know his he's and she's. But Stevie's mix-up is Al's doing. The last two Fridays, Al babysat Stevie, and I tagged along. Stevie's a funny little kid, and we all had a good time—though I wouldn't admit to anyone that I liked playing with a preschooler. But because of that, Stevie's

gotten real attached to us, especially to Al. When Stevie first called Al a “he,” she didn’t correct him. Al’s eyes had flown to mine, and I didn’t correct him either.

We show the lifeguard in the pool office the silver tags pinned to our towels. Mrs. Jambor stays in front of the office talking to another lady, and Al goes left, and I go right.

“Al,” Stevie calls, “you’re supposed to go that way.” He’s pointing toward the boys’.

Al stops dead. Her eyes flick to mine, but I don’t know how to protect her secret. She smiles at Stevie and says, “No, I go this way.”

She hurries away, and Stevie looks at me with his mouth hanging open, but I hurry away too. Stevie says nothing more about it, but Al wears her T-shirt the rest of the afternoon, even while in the pool. I know that’s so Stevie won’t see her suit has a top.

In the late afternoon Al and I are sunning ourselves on the deck next to the Jambors. I’m dozing, my ears tuning in and out to a Marco Polo game, when Al stands up and says she’ll get us pops. I open my eyes, and they fall to a splotch of red on her towel. For a moment, I think it’s lipstick.

“Al,” I say, “you cut yourself.” Al starts checking, and I see blood smeared between her thighs. I shoot my eyes away.

I know what the blood means. Al saw a movie in school last spring and, with her lip curled up as if this was the final straw, she told me that because girls can have babies, when they get old enough their bodies go through a monthly cycle like the moon going through its phases, and at the end they have to bleed.

Al snatches up her towel and wraps it around her waist and trots away. The lifeguard calls, “No running,” but Al speeds up.

I fast-walk to outside the girls’. “Al?”

Stevie comes to stand beside me. "Is he hurt bad?"

"Al's a girl, honey," Mrs. Jambor says from behind us.

I want to punch her in the stomach, make her to take her words back! I want to turn everything back to when I was Stevie's age and Al and I were running through Indiana cornfields.

I hustle through the boys'. Al is on her bike, streaking down the street. I pedal after her, but I can't catch up. I burst into the house. Mom is standing outside the bathroom door telling Al not to be silly, that nothing's really changed.

Al flings open the door, red-eyed, angry-faced. "Everything's changed, my life isn't mine any more." Al pushes past Mom into her bedroom and slams her door.

I want to follow her. I want to say, "Just stay you." I want to say, "It's only a little blood." I want to say, "Don't leave me."

Mom heads toward the kitchen and tells me to go to my room, that everything's okay. I turn toward my bedroom, turn back. I knock on Al's door.

"Al, come play with me. Race you!"

I hold my breath. Hold it, hold it.

I have to take a gulp. I want to cry, but then I remember I'm too old. I go outside and pick up a softball lying in the yard, toss it in my hand. I hurl it at the slice of moon hanging in the sky.