

MY SISTER, A GIRL

by Peg Daniels

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

Alice and I, dressed in our orange-and-blue swimsuits and “Eat My Bubbles” T-shirts, dash out of our house. We jump on our bikes and pedal toward the rec center pool, the early-June morning air sticking to my skin like flypaper. Al is already ahead by the time we’re passing Ricky’s basketball hoop. She gets to the big magnolia, and I’m three houses behind. I round the corner and try to put on speed, but I’m trailing by nearly a quarter block when she slams to a stop at the bike rack.

“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 out loud. I’m going on nine and Al turned twelve and no one else is around, so those words would get me tackled and sat on.

Within minutes, tons of other kids have biked or been driven to the big red brick rec center, and they stand near us on the steps, talking and laughing. Al and I are still shy, though, and haven’t made friends with any of them. We moved here to Auburn a couple weeks ago—for the schools, Daddy says—but before this we lived in Lanett, near the river. There, we sometimes played football and basketball with neighbor boys a year or two older than Al. But Al and I had the best times just us two together. We’d cook up our own fun—fishing with cane poles, skinny-dipping, catching snakes and salamanders and frogs. 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 drives up in his pickup. He lets us into the building, and we race inside and down the stairs. Al cuts right, to the girls' dressing room, and I cut left, to the boys'. One time last year at the Lanett pool, I looked up from where I lay on my beach towel to catch Al coming out the boys'. "I was just testing," she told me, running a hand through her super-short hair. 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 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.

The dressing rooms lead straight out to the pool, and I go to my station, for lessons with the other Stingrays. Al is two stations over, with the advanced group—the Tigerfish. 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 because 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 astronaut—we were on the family vacation at the new Space Center in Huntsville—but maybe I couldn't be because I didn't want to study as hard as she does. She said I'm a boy, I don't have to study as hard. She said this like she was mad at me. But then she smiled and punched my arm and said she'd be an astronaut too. She turned her face to the moon and said she'd take one giant leap for her kind. I'm not exactly sure what she meant.

At the end of our lessons, the instructors give everybody fifteen minutes "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 pop 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.

A 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 boy. 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 hollers at Mama that we're going to friends' for breakfast. Mama 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 Mama 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 mama feeds us breakfast with eggs and plenty of grits. We watch TV awhile—That Girl, Bewitched—and then Jenny asks if we want to go roller skating. We've never skated, but we say sure. Jenny's mama drives out along Opelika Road to the rink, way past the place Daddy fixes cars. She gives us money to rent skates, and then she sits in a chair and reads a Southern Living. Al and Jenny go into the girls', for a long time. When they come out, Jenny is

wearing red lipstick and blue eyeshadow. And Al has faint traces of red on *her* lips! Al shrugs at me and makes a face. Jenny's mama looks up but then goes back to her magazine.

On the rink, Al and Jack and I do a lot of hanging onto each other and falling and laughing, having a blast, but Jenny skates slow along the edge in her shift dress and flutters her lashes at the older boys. One comes and skates with her. Al and Jack and I roll our eyes at each other, and Al scrubs her lips hard with her fingers.

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

Jenny's mama takes us to what looks like a little wood house on Glenn Avenue across from the Baptist church. Jenny calls the place "the Sani Flush," and Al and I laugh. We stand outside, and a man hands us our food through a window. I eat a footlong chili-cheese dog and a chocolate dip cone, but Al only eats half her dog—says she's got a stomachache. Too many biscuits at breakfast, if you ask me. After we use a jillion napkins to wipe the grease and chili off our chins and hands, Jenny's mama drives toward our home. But as we pass behind the rec center, Al has her let us out, telling her we'll walk the rest of the way. Kids have got up a game of football on the softball field, and Al says we should see 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—only, since our side lost the toss, we have to be Bama.

The game is going great, Al proving she's no slouch—though when she laterals it to me a couple of times, our team gets mad because I'm the smallest and slowest. A while later, Al gets tackled. Like usual when a kid 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 laugh mean. 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 hangdog, but she's got chlorine for blood, so she can't say no. Going into the rec center ahead of us are our next-door neighbors, Miz James and little Stevie. Little Stevie tugs at his mama's beach robe and points at Al and asks, "Can I play with him?"

Miz James flashes us a smile, and I know she's thinking it's cute 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'll never let on to anyone that I liked playing with a baby. 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 all go downstairs, and Al signs us in with the lifeguard at the table. Miz James stays talking to another lady, and Al goes right, and I go left.

"Al," Stevie hollers, "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 keep her secret safe. She smiles at Stevie and says, "No, I go this way."

She hurries away, and Stevie looks at me with his mouth hung 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 pool deck next to the Jameses.

I'm dozing, my ears tuning in and out to a Marco Polo game, when Al stands up and says she's going home, her stomach hurts worse than ever. I open my eyes, and they fall to a splotch of red on her towel. For a second, 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. Last spring, with her lip curled up as if this was the final straw, Al told me that know-it-all Cousin Brenda told her that because girls 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, sugar," Miz James says from behind us.

I want to punch her in the stomach, make her take her words back! I want the whole day taken back. I want Al and me taken back to when I was Stevie's age and us two were fishing the Chattahoochee.

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. Mama 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 no more." Al pushes past Mama 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.”

Mama heads toward the kitchen and tells me to go get out of my wet suit, 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 run outside. A football is lying in our yard, and I pick it up, toss it in my hand. I hurl it at the slice of moon hanging in the sky.