

Smithereens

UNDERWATER, ALICE WAS NO DEAFER than anyone else. Velvet silence. Liquid light. What she could see of the world was a broad-brimmed plate; she wore it like a hat. A hat decorated with scraggly pines, run around with ribbons of cloud, pinned with skewers of sunlight. Yet for all that, it had no weight. She jostled her hips this way and that way, as if doing a hootchy-kootchy dance, and the world wheeled overhead in perfect balance.

Then she shot up for air with a *whoosh*.

The world clicked back into place. The shallows of the lake were churned by a hundred splashing, shrieking girls. Their screams knotted together into a big ache in Alice's brain. The counsellors—nuns in training, mostly, though stylish in pedal pushers and culottes—paced the dock, blowing whistles whenever anyone's life was threatened by too much watery exuberance. 'Fabia Lanahan! Stop

doing that to Mary Jane Jones!' Alice flicked her hair expertly back with a toss of her head and grinned wildly at no one. Then she plunged deep into her element.

It was the third day of her two weeks at Camp Saint Theresa. The weather was good, the food disgusting and plentiful, and nobody else in her cabin came from the Sacred Heart Home for Girls. Some of them were such chatterers they hadn't even realised yet that Alice couldn't speak well. So she sat on the bunk at night, making a wallet from prepunched plastic leather stitched with plastic cord for Sister Vincent de Paul, if she ever came back. The cabin leader was a large woman named Sally. She believed in regular bone-crushing hugs, morning, noon, and night, and the girls submitted as a kind of penance. Other than having to satisfy Sally's need to feel motherly, Alice found camp safe enough. Of the stink-hole bathrooms—no more than toilet seats perched above gaping holes—it was best not to think.

Alice wasn't used to being on her own as much as camp allowed. For as long as she could remember, there'd been nuns hovering within a few feet, encouraging, reprimanding, consoling. A mobile forest of women shaped more or less like Christmas trees, though done in black and white instead of jewelled colours. (The nuns at the Sacred Heart Home for Girls had not yet embraced the new stylish habits, with their scandalously shorter skirts and civilian-style blouses.) Nuns were a fact of life, like crucifixes marking their holy quadrants on the walls, or telephone lines crossing the sky in imprecise musical staves. Nuns

persisted. They weren't so much a motif in Alice's life as an element of nature, like air or dust or birds.

So down, down, into the lake the colour of dandruff shampoo, and Alice was like the pearl in the TV commercial that dropped slowly, silently. On its own agenda, as Sister John Boss would say. Alice propelled herself like a frog, like an Egyptian doing the bent-arm dance as a swimming stroke. Alice could keep her eyes open underwater. She was as sharp as Flipper. There, for instance, through the gloom: There was Naomi Matthews pretending to swim with little pouncing hand motions hitting the water. Alice could see her feet touch down for nervous assurance every eight seconds or so. The big cheat.

She butted up into Naomi's side. Naomi gave a little squeal even Alice could hear. Alice stood up, water streaming down her hair. 'Oh, Naomi. Sorry.'

'Watch where you're going, clumsy,' said Naomi. She was trying to swim without getting her golden mane wet.

'Swim tag! You're it!' screamed Alice, and splashed Naomi in the face with water. She tapped Naomi lightly on the shoulder and darted away with a muscular sidestroke. But Naomi wasn't biting. 'Oh, Alice, *grow up*,' she groaned. 'I'd like to take a calm swim for a moment if I can.'

'*Can* you swim?' said Alice daringly. 'Don't look like any kind of swimming to me.'

'Taking a break on your speech lessons for the summer, I guess,' said Naomi deftly. 'I can't quite make out your comment so bye-bye for now.' She fake-dog-paddled away. Even her shoulders rose like little porcelain

doorknobs over the water. She couldn't fool a blind person with that act, thought Alice scornfully. At least there's one thing I can do better than Naomi.

Alice had been surprised to see Naomi here, at the jamboree barbecue that opened the two-week camp session. Naomi had triumphed in the Sacred Heart–Saint Mary's joint production of *My Fair Lady*. Naomi had gone to glory in her half of the role, as Eliza Doolittle transformed into an articulate lady. Then she had moved out to live with the Harrigans. She'd taken all her things in a grey suitcase with the stitching coming out of the leather reinforcements. Alice had watched her leave. Mr Harrigan had carried the suitcase to the car; he was so short it almost dragged on the sidewalk. Mrs Harrigan had fluffed and plumped and kissed the air around Naomi, as if terrified yet to come in real contact, in case Naomi would change her mind before the getaway car had a chance to roar into the sunset. It seemed like a living nightmare to Alice, watching from the window on the stairs. Naomi looked more embarrassed than anything else.

She'd sent back a couple of letters to say she missed everyone. 'Even Alice!' she'd added in a PS. 'Can ya believe it?' She'd told of a life of great luxury. Her own bedroom. A new school. Freedom to call up friends on the telephone. Most enviable of all, her own alarm clock with a *transistor radio* in it. 'Pop music is fab,' she'd reported. 'Ya should hear it! Ya'd love it.'

'Her grammar is deteriorating,' clucked Sister Francis de Sales. 'You girls would do best not to envy poor Naomi too

much. There's no equalling the kind of advantages you have, believe me.'

On the whole, the girls did believe her. Naomi Matthews was the kind of girl things happened to, that was all. She'd probably grow up to have a cooking show on TV or something professional like that. But there could be deep sorrow in the future, ready to snare her when she got too happy. Especially if she forgot she'd started out in a girls' home like the rest of them. The girls left behind were patient. They could wait for fate or the devil to trip Naomi up. The more joy she had in youth, the worse it would be for her later. They pitied her, really.

At the opening barbecue, Alice was astounded to be lassoed with a pair of sunburned arms, to have her face burnished by an ebullient crisp structure of hair. The permanent wave was a novelty, but the colour could only be Naomi Matthews. And there she was, acting like a long-lost best friend. 'Alice Colossus!' she was shouting. 'What're you doing here!'

'You know,' said Alice, mumbling more than usual in her surprise. 'The girls of Sacred Heart get to go to Camp Saint Theresa. You did, too.'

'My parents thought I'd love to do something from my old life,' Naomi babbled on, 'and I said, well, why not Camp Saint Theresa? I hoped somebody I knew would be here! Are you around for more than one session?'

'No,' said Alice.

'Me either,' said Naomi. 'What a cheat. It's not as if they don't have the money. They just love me so much they

can't bear for me to be gone for more than two weeks.'

'Oh,' said Alice. 'How's the lady? The lady acting like a mother, but she don't do it so good?'

'My mom,' said Naomi severely. 'She's fine. She's a little—uh. Well, she's not exactly Mary Poppins. I mean, she cries a lot. She's okay. How's Sister Vincent de Paul? She back yet?'

'Not yet.'

'Anyone else here from home? I mean from the home?'

'Ruth Peters and some of her dormitory friends are in the junior camp.'

And just then Ruth Peters had run up, having sighted Naomi from across a couple of picnic tables. She bumbled like a water cooler. With a shriek of joy she climbed into Naomi's lap and began to suck her thumb for all it was worth. Ruth hadn't liked Naomi much, but she was already homesick and glad to see another familiar face. After a couple of minutes she switched to Alice's lap.

'Well,' said Naomi, 'better go back to my table. See you around, Alice.'

'No—don't go!' protested Ruth, who was capable of having a screaming fit at the slightest separation from anyone she knew.

'Only over there,' said Naomi. 'Honestly. She hasn't changed a bit, has she?' She winked at Alice. Alice felt faintly affronted by the wink. It had only been six months. How much was a now-five-year-old supposed to change in six months? Yet Naomi seemed to have become a certified teenager. Even her breasts seemed more confident.

Naomi had figured out who was who and latched on to a squadron of slightly older girls, who sneaked lipstick on at night though it wasn't allowed. Alice made the mistake, only once, of trying to hang around with them during a free period. They'd arched their eyebrows the first time she spoke and exchanged glances with Naomi. Alice had wandered away then, down to the lakefront, to immerse herself in a lake that didn't express any objection to her. And her spirits righted themselves there.

So for a week she stayed more or less on her own. With her long legs, she was an asset on a basketball team and enjoyed the evening game when the supper slop and after-dinner announcements were done. In the skirmishes between the eight girls on each team, a faint grey dust was raised from the bare soil on which they played. The dust hung in the sloping light, and Alice lunged through it dribbling and dodging, but not so engaged that she didn't suddenly remember the strange light in the kitchen on the morning when the retreat centre burned down. Alice made a basket. Maybe the wreck of the retreat house was around here somewhere? It had been in the mountains, a couple of hours by school bus, like Camp Saint Theresa. 'Way to go, Naomi!' screamed her teammates, who seemed to have confused Alice with her more glamorous acquaintance. How they did this was a mystery, as Naomi was giving Alice a wide berth now.

That was the first week. Then the camp director announced a talent show to be held on the night before the session ended. Naomi cornered Alice on the way out of the

mess hall and said, 'I got a great idea! You and me could do the Eliza Doolittle thing! We already know our parts. You can sing "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" as "Life Would Be So Heavenly" and then go offstage, and I'll come on and sing "I Could Have Danced All Night". But we got to find someone who knows how to play the piano or something.'

'Nah,' said Alice. 'Once was enough.'

'We'll be brilliant,' said Naomi.

'It makes me feel stupid to be the dumb one.'

'First prize,' said Naomi, 'is fifty bucks. We could split it.'

'Well,' said Alice. 'We got to give some to the piano guy.'

'Deal,' said Naomi.

'Deal,' said Alice with a sinking feeling.

In the second week of the session Alice tried to become chatty with Sally the cabin leader. As a nun in training she might know something about Sister Vincent de Paul. But as far as Alice could figure, if Sally was aiming at being a nun she wasn't going to make it. She smoked cigarettes and sang Beatles songs to herself while she pinned her hair around plastic rollers the size of beer cans. She said to Alice, 'In this business I know as few nuns as I can get away with.' At least that's what Alice thought she said. 'Sister Vincent de Paul?' said Alice again faintly. 'Never had the pleasure. What order is she?' asked Sally. 'Redemption.' 'Hah!' said Sally contemptuously, 'Redemptions! The living end!'

Naomi had identified a piano player, a timid girl from Schaghticoke called Wendy Beasley. Naomi had threatened to pull off Wendy's bathing suit in the lake if she didn't agree to accompany them in selections from *My Fair Lady*.

Wendy, suffering a nearly terminal case of modesty, succumbed to the pressure. Alice thought that family life wasn't having a healthy influence on Naomi Matthews. 'By the way,' she said one evening, 'are you Naomi Harrigan now?'

'Ow oo Naomi Howwigan,' parroted Naomi. 'Sorry, Alice, couldn't resist. Really, you make a perfect Eliza Doolittle. I wonder if you will ever meet a real Henry Higgins to teach you how to talk?' She didn't answer the question, and Alice didn't have the nerve to ask it again.

Costumes! Sally found an old black-lace mantilla some lady had left behind in the rustic Chapel in the Pines, which was no more than a concrete floor with a roof and some banners made out of felt, saying PRAISE and REJOICE and BE GLAD. The black lace thing made a perfect shawl. Now all Alice needed was a basket of flowers and a crummy skirt. The kitchen help came up with a wicker picnic basket, and there were more black-eyed Susans and Queen Anne's lace and daisies in the fields than a whole battalion of Eliza Doolittles could use. Sally also sacrificed a perfectly good grey skirt for Alice's costume, which was nice of her, Alice had to admit, but the sacrifice locked Alice into having to go through with the performance. Sally cut holes in the skirt with a Swiss army knife and smeared ashes from the campfire all over it. 'You look like a perfect wreck!' she exclaimed when Alice did herself up in shawl, skirt, and basket.

It was a bit harder finding ball gown material for Eliza, as played by Naomi. Wendy Beasley suggested a nun's habit, but that was out of the question. In the end they rigged up

something with a sheet from the infirmary and a gold belt that was really Sally's necklace. Alice thought Naomi looked like the bride of Frankenstein with all that hair, but then Sally fussed over it with pins and hair spray, and it all stood on top of her head like a flock of birds densely packed together with glue, soft and hard at the same time.

'You know I hate this,' said Alice as they stood in the pantry, waiting for their turn.

'Twenty bucks,' said Naomi inspiringly. 'Think what you can do with your share of the first prize. Twenty bucks.'

'And now Alice Colossus to perform *My Fair Lady*, as the Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle!' screeched Sally through the ancient PA system.

Wendy Beasley lurched over the keyboard as if she were having stomach cramps and battered the opening chords loud enough for Alice to catch the musical cue. She sang while squatting like an Iroquois Indian and pretending to rub her hands before a fire. Actually my voice is pretty good, she thought. Nobody was laughing, which was an improvement over the time she'd done it with the boys from Saint Mary's of Albany. 'And life could be so heavenly!'

Ruth Peters came up to the edge of the stage. 'Alice!' she cooed. 'Hi, Alice!' Everyone laughed.

Alice just went on with the next line. Ruth remembered the words, too, and sang along as she scrambled up the steps. She held Alice's hand, and they sang to the end of the song. The little dance Alice had planned was ruined, but it was okay. Ruth was having such a good time.

When she finished, the girls began to shout and cheer.

They were a very enthusiastic audience. They hammered their feet on the floor and called in rhythm, 'NA-O-MI! NA-O-MI!' Alice would have preferred their calling 'AL-ICE, AL-ICE,' but as long as her part was done she didn't care. She swept off stage and Sally intoned, 'Eliza Doolittle makes friends with a speech therapist named Henry Higgins, who teaches her how to speak clearly and then takes her to a fancy ball. Naomi Matthews as Eliza coming home from the ball.'

So her last name *was* still Matthews. Hmm. Alice wondered why. She watched Naomi twirl in from the dark shadows in her silly-looking bedsheet. The audience oohed and aahed. Wendy Beasley slaved away at the crisp runs of the introduction, and Naomi began to shrill out her part. When she got to the final line, she improvised a can-can kick by picking up her sheets and jackknifing her legs out like a single demented Rockette. The crowd shrieked—praising, rejoicing, and being glad. Naomi warbled out her last note, squeezing every second she could out of it, and even Alice in the mercy of her deafness could tell Naomi was a half-tone sharp. The girls of the 1968 second summer session of Camp Saint Theresa weren't, on the whole, as discriminating as Alice. They went wild.

They stamped. They wolf-whistled. They called, 'NA-O-MI! NA-O-MI!' Naomi beckoned Alice back on stage for another bow. Alice and Ruth Peters came out. Ruth bowed more times than anyone.

Third prize went to Cabin Saint Dymphna, for singing

'Puff the Magic Dragon' in harmony. Third prize had no money attached. Naomi and Alice got second prize, which was worth only twenty-five bucks—ten bucks each and five for Wendy Beasley. Then Wendy Beasley walked off with the first prize of fifty dollars. Without so much as a word of friendly warning, she had entered herself as a separate act. She had played 'Malagueña', all eight pages of it, in just under ninety seconds, even the slow part. The traitor.

But Alice hadn't ever expected to have as much as twenty bucks, so it wasn't too big a disappointment to pocket ten. Naomi was so thrilled with cleaning up what she called the popular support of Camp Saint Theresa that she didn't even mind Alice trailing along afterward when she met her glitzier friends. 'You know you have a good voice,' said Naomi, not too grudgingly. 'I mean you can't understand much, but it has a pretty sound.'

'You've got a *great* voice, Naomi,' said one of the other girls in an enthusiastic tizzy, bouncing and beaming fatuously at Alice.

'I'm not Naomi,' said Alice.

'She didn't say Naomi,' said Naomi. 'She said Naomi.'

From time to time, Alice found herself in a hearing dead-end. Usually she just shrugged and accepted the fact that she couldn't figure out what was going on. But Ruth Peters was still clutching Alice's left hand. With her higher voice she clarified for Alice what was being said. 'She's calling you Miami, Alice,' said Ruth. 'Not Naomi.'

'Miami?' said Alice.

'That's what they were all shouting when you finished,'

said Naomi. 'I didn't get it, either. What's Miami got to do with the price of beans?'

'Isn't that her name?' said Pam, one of the glitzier girls.

'It's *Alice*,' said Naomi. 'Everybody knows that.'

'No,' said Pam. 'Why'd you tell everybody it was Miami?'

'I never did,' said Alice.

'You did too.'

'Nobody don't talk to me,' said Alice. 'So, like, when?'

'When you won the basketball competition, most dunks from a standing start,' said the girl in an aggrieved voice.

'Stop pulling our legs, Miami. Just because you can sing.'

'*What* basketball thing?'

'Last session, the basketball thing.'

'I wasn't here last session,' said Alice.

'She wasn't here last session,' said Naomi. 'You've got a screw loose, Pam.'

'You were too,' said Pam. A couple of the other girls nodded and shrugged in a single motion. 'Don't give me that.'

'I was not,' said Alice. 'I was home.'

There were marshmallows over an open fire. Most of the camp had flocked there after the talent show. Alice, Naomi, Ruth, and the older girls stood aside, mired in their misunderstandings. Tiny red sparks went zigging up, burning out before they got even eight or ten feet high. Above, the stars were salty white, and the wind rushed through the trees with the sound of water. 'All I know,' said the challenged Pam, who could be as energetically offended as she could be delighted, 'is that I was here for both sessions, and Miami won the basketball jump award.'

And there were enough girls there then who can back me up on this now. That's why people were chanting Mi-am-i! when you were finished singing.'

'I thought they were saying *Na-o-mi*,' said Alice.

'They said that later,' said Pam. The other girls were drifting toward the fire.

'How'd she speak?' said Naomi suddenly.

'Regular,' said Pam. 'Why?'

'Alice can't speak regular,' said Naomi. 'She's got a defect. Her tongue is too big or something, and she's deaf.'

'Only partly,' said Alice sharply.

'You mean that's not an act?' said Pam. 'I thought she was just being silly.'

'Ha-ha,' said Alice coldly, and turned toward the fire.

'Sorry,' called Pam. 'I didn't mean it like that.'

The fire wasn't any fun. It brought back too many memories of the retreat house burning down and Sister Vincent de Paul getting scorched. Alice wandered out onto the dock. The lake was a dark mirror. Above it, the stars were tiny as grains of sand, yet they seemed to light up the whole sky. The lake surface, though bright in its own way, was too active to reflect the stars. It stirred in its bed, almost imperceptibly. Alice had an idea of diving into the water, even with her stupid Eliza Doolittle costume on. They hadn't even been clapping for her, but for some girl named Miami they were mixing her up with. Every little happiness got shattered into smithereens. Nothing was fair. She hoped she never saw Naomi Matthews again. She couldn't wait till tomorrow to go home.