

1. Me

I've always loved fantasy stories. I suppose it's because I find real life a bit of a drag. The idea of escaping into another world, where the people are weird, the animals talk, and magical things can happen, both good and bad, is something I daydream about a lot – a bit too much, Mum and Dad always say. What I wouldn't give to travel to another world sometimes, full of adventure, like in *Doctor Who* or *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Now there's a book I always wanted to read, but I never got round to it – well, not until now. I found a free eBook version of it and I just had to download it. I've seen the film and I know the story. Who doesn't know about Alice, sitting on the riverbank with her sister, who's reading the strangest book Alice has ever seen.

*'What is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversation?'*¹

It does make me wonder what sort of book it is. A Maths book, maybe, with no pictures as such, only diagrams and examples of equations; only, technically, diagrams could count as pictures. *Alice in Wonderland* is set in the old days, though. Girls like Alice and her sister didn't study stuff like Maths back then. They didn't get much education at all before they were married off; I know that from a social history class at school. Of course, *Alice* is a fantasy story, so her sister's book could just be the type with a load of words in it that don't make any sense. I had to read one like that in Classics last year: *The Iliad*, about a queen from Greece, who runs off with a prince in a country called Troy, and that starts the Trojan War. There's a lot of killing and too many characters to keep up with. It's supposed to be a poem, full of flowery language, but it goes on a bit and doesn't even rhyme, not like the poems in *Alice*.

It's a hot day and Alice is dozing off, then she sees a white rabbit wearing a jacket and waistcoat running past her, checking the time on his gold watch. She follows him down a hole and that's when her adventures begin. She meets the Mad Hatter, who wears a silly big hat with a price ticket on it in old money, a March hare, a dopey dormouse, who can't stay awake (reminds me of me on a Sunday morning) and a crabby old cow called the Queen of Hearts with an army made out of playing cards. Funnily enough, my nan's name is Alice. I was supposed to be named after her, but at the last minute Mum changed her mind and decided to call me Alisha instead. Alisha Elizabeth Dainton is my full name. Everyone calls me Ali. I've just turned thirteen and I got an iPad for my birthday. I've brought it with me on holiday to read books, take photos to put on Instagram and chat to my best mate Cassie on Facetime. I look up from the screen and see other comparisons with *Alice*: the riverbank is a pool at the hotel where we're staying in Limassol and the sister is my sister Salina (yeah, I know! What a name! That's a character in a book Mum read as a kid and she'd always liked it, but we call Salina Sal and she won't answer to anything else), only Sal has fewer clothes on: she's wearing a yellow bikini that leaves nothing to the imagination. Sal's sixteen and a selfish pain in the bum. She's looking at a book of sorts, actually with conversation, but no pictures. She's texting her mates on her iPhone because her Snapchat isn't working. Oh, yeah, and there's also a white rabbit, a feller on the sun lounger next to mine, wearing a pair of white Psycho Bunny swimming shorts.

The words in *Alice* have become jumbled up and I'm starting to doze off, too. Like Alice's sister, Sal isn't the greatest of company because she isn't speaking to me: she's annoyed because Mum and Dad have gone on an excursion to Kourion and she has to look after me. I should have gone with them, but I've been made to stay behind because I had a seizure when I got up this morning. I have this rubbish thing called epilepsy, JME to be exact: juvenile myoclonic epilepsy. I get these weird episodes: I have blackouts, fall down a lot and my body goes rigid. Sometimes I even hear strange noises and see lights and other things that aren't there. I'm on medication for all that, only it doesn't always work. Stuff like stress and the heat trigger it off. It's

over thirty-five degrees in Cyprus today. Now and then, I might get a night seizure when I'm asleep, but that doesn't happen much.

I'm a bit hacked off Mum and Dad went on the trip without me and left me with Sal. She's not interested in going on excursions, but because of me, she's had to cancel her date this afternoon with one of the hotel waiters. They'd planned on going to a bar in Limassol and it was all she could talk about until I put the kibosh on it with my fit, so now I'm in the doghouse with her. Mum and Dad don't know about the date. Nikolos is twenty-two and they keep telling Sal off for flirting with him.

Something makes me jump out of my nap. 'Can I go in the pool?' I plead to Sal. I'm sitting under a parasol, wearing a massive sun hat and plastered in sun cream, roasting like a Christmas turkey, and I'm dying to cool off.

'No,' she snaps without taking her eyes off her phone. 'You know you can't swim after a fit, and you can't go in alone, anyway.'

'You could come in with me.'

That grabs her attention. 'I'll ruin my hair!'

I bite my lip and try not to laugh as I stare at her hair. She had it done at the hotel salon yesterday. Mum and Dad weren't happy when she turned up to dinner last night with it all pinned high on top of her head in a beehive style. It cost her ninety Euros, nearly half her spending money blown already. She looks like a blonde Marge Simpson. Dad told her she can't sponge any more spends off him. Her nails are polished and painted, too, another thirty Euros down the drain. I fan my face with the enormous hat, wondering how come Sal can lie there in her skimpy bikini, her skinny body also plastered in sun cream, not sweating one little bit, her make-up not even running. I don't call that fair.

'I'm not asking you to go *under* the water,' I say irritably. 'I'm only asking you to *stand* in it and watch while I have a swim.'

'And what if you have another fit?' she wants to know. 'I'll have to save your life and *then* I'll get my hair wet! Put that hat back on, an' all! I'm not getting it in the neck because you decide to get sunstroke on top of everything else!'

I pull a face before taking a swig from the bottle. I hate water at the best of times and it's warm now. I'm desperate for a glass of lemonade or an ice cream, but Mum keeps saying E numbers in sugary food and drinks could bring on one of my seizures. Mum talks a load of rubbish most of the time. She believes everything she reads and worries far too much about things that don't matter. Sal says she'll grass me up if I even look at an ice cream; I tell her I'll grass on *her* if she sneaks off to meet that Nikolos.

So that's why I daydream of escaping to another world. It's dead boring being me sometimes. If everyone else and his dog can have an ice cream or go for a swim, why can't I?

I take off my sunglasses and look at the people in the pool: some swimming, some bobbing about, some chatting. If only I could shake off Sal and dive in! I yawn widely and close my eyes again.

'Oh, *h!*'

That's Sal's silly, flirty, little girl voice, the one she saves for all the fellers. Nikolos has turned up in thin cotton white trousers, black flip-flops and a pale blue short-sleeved top, instead of the usual uniform of black trousers and beige shirt with the name of the hotel sewn on the pocket.

'Hello, Sal,' he replies in his husky Greek voice. He's very fit, with tanned skin, short, thick black curly hair and brown eyes. I really don't know what he sees in my bimbo sister – well, apart from the obvious. 'I got your text message. I am sorry we cannot keep our date today.'

Sal sighs and flicks her thumb at me. 'Blame *her*! She's not well again. Mum and Dad have gone to Kourion, so...'

'But it does not mean you cannot have fun.'

'I can't go anywhere, can I? I've got to babysit *her*.'

I chuck the hat on the ground; it's making my hair damp with sweat. 'I'm still here, you know. I'm not asking you to stick around. Get lost if you want.'

'You know very well Mum and Dad'll have my life if I do.'

'I will join you,' says Nikolos, smiling, 'and we can sunbathe together.'

Sal's face lights up as Nikolos strips off his top to reveal his impressive six-pack and chest. I roll my eyes when the trousers come off: he has on a pair of tight black swimming shorts and the sudden rush of heat to my face has nothing to do with the sun.

'Are you allowed to sunbathe with us?' I ask crossly. He's hotel staff and it's not as if we know him all that well.

'I can do what I like on my day off.' He smiles at me. I don't smile back.

'Yeah!' sneers Sal. 'He can do what he likes and his dad's the hotel manager, so shut yer gob, Ali Dainton!'

Sal turns her back on me as Nikolos lies back on the vacant sunbed next to her. Their heads are practically touching while they chat and giggle. Fuming, I point my iPad at them and take a sly picture. Wait till Mum and Dad see that! Serves her right for not letting me go in the pool! I make sick noises as Nikolos leans over and kisses Sal's cheek. I'm not sticking around while they cosy up to one another, I'll need a bucket in a minute! Stuff 'em! I've got ten Euros, so I'm off to buy an ice cream and a glass of lemonade, and then I'm going for a swim!

I switch off the iPad, climb into my beach dress, put my sunglasses back on and move noiselessly off the sunbed before easing my feet into my flip-flops. The bloke with the Psycho Bunny shorts has put his word search puzzle book on his face to protect himself from the sun.

I decide to eat my ice cream and drink my lemonade on the opposite side of the pool to where our sunbeds are, so that if Sal decides to come after me I'll have a head start. I can run faster than her, anyway. I park myself on one of the flat rocks dotted around the side of the water. I like the way the rocks make the pool seem like it's part of the sea and there are pretty, colourful little flowers growing between them. The water feels lovely on my feet. I lick my ice cream and watch as Nikolos's arm reaches for Sal's waist. If Mum and Dad catch them now...but they aren't due back for another two hours at least. Well, I have the evidence in that photo and I'll use it if I have to.

I feel a lot cooler after eating my ice cream and my lemonade has plenty of ice in it. I feel better, only I wish I'd kept my hat on after all. The sun is blazing right down on me. Sal and Nikolos still haven't noticed I'm missing. They only have eyes for one another.

I take off my beach dress and slide into the lovely coolness of the pool. I duck under the water for a second – bliss! I'd spend all day and night in the water if I could. I've kept my sunglasses on and they're all wet, but they need a bit of a clean, anyway, because they keep getting smudged with suntan lotion.

I bob in the water for a bit before spotting an abandoned inflatable crocodile in the middle of the pool, so I swim towards it and climb on, watching the world go by as I drift around. A lad swims past with his girlfriend holding onto his shoulders; a woman with grey hair and very tanned skin wearing a pink bikini is lying on a large inflatable banana sipping a blue cocktail; some boys are splashing at one another in the corner of the pool. I feel chilled, then my eyes start to droop. The sun is making me sleepy and it feels nice. I don't realise I'm floating towards the deep end where someone is about to jump in. Jumping in the pool isn't allowed, but no one takes any notice of the rules. I hear the splash before I feel the weight of a body knocking me off the crocodile and forcing me under the water, making me panic and flap about as I try to scramble my way back to the surface. My sunglasses have floated away. It's difficult to see with all the water bubbling around and all I can hear is a rushing sound in my ears. I keep my mouth firmly closed and hold my breath, trying not to panic, but I'm dead scared. I can see the sun above my head. There aren't as many bubbles now, my head reaches the surface, I'm coughing and spluttering and a gross dribble of snot is dangling from my nose.

Someone – Nikolos – is towing me to the side of the pool, where Sal is waiting, shouting and swearing at me.

‘Help her, Sal!’ he shouts. He has his hands on my waist. He lifts me up from the water and Sal grabs hold of my arms, almost pulling them out of their sockets as she drags me out. I land on the tiles with a slap.

‘You stupid **bleep**!’ she yells. ‘You **bleepin** well wait till I tell Mum and Dad on you! Don’t go in the **bleepin** water, I said! What did I say? Don’t go in the **bleepin** water...!’

I’m panting to get my breath back as Nikolos helps me to my feet. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see one of the hotel staff in a suit running down the steps towards us. The group of lads mucking about earlier are being told to get out of the water by a waiter; one of them is the lad who jumped in.

‘Are you all right, Alisha?’ Nikolos asks.

‘Yeah,’ I gasp, bending down and resting my hands on my knees, dripping a puddle and blowing water through my nostrils. ‘Cheers.’

Sal is still ranting at me, giving me a headache on top of the one I’ve already got. I dive at her.

‘Oh, just shut the **bleepin** well *up*, you stupid cow!’

There’s a yell and a splash as she lands in the shallow end. When she bobs to the surface, her beehive is sopping wet and flattened. She smacks the water in fury.

‘Ali? Sal?’ cries a familiar voice over the laughter of the audience. ‘What’s going on?’

It’s Mum and Dad, back from Kourion already!

I’m still panting, Nikolos is standing there in his shorts, and Sal is busy scrambling out of the water, blabbing threats of murder. I stammer at Mum, ‘What – what are you doing back early?’

‘We’re not early!’ Mum’s furious. ‘We told you we’d be back in time for lunch.’

‘But I thought you weren’t back for another two hours.’

‘No, that was the other excursion, the one that went to Kourion and then on to the Kykkos Monastery,’ says Dad. ‘We changed it to just visit Kourion when you took ill so we’d get back earlier, remember?’

I can’t say that I do.

‘We shouldn’t have gone at all by the look of it!’ snaps Mum. ‘We only went because Sal promised to look after you, and she’s done a really good job of *that*! Look at the state of you, Ali! You were told not to go swimming; and Sal...!’

Sal, her hair sticking to her face, lunges at me.

‘She pushed me in!’ she screeches. ‘Look at the state of me! I’m goin’ to **bleepin** well *kill* her!’

Nikolos grabs hold of her and that annoys Dad, who steps in and removes his hands from Sal’s person.

‘Hang on, Dad.’

I tell him about the lad landing on me and Nikolos coming to my rescue. Dad sniffs and thanks him grudgingly. After giving Nikolos a final glare, Dad goes over to where the group of lads are having their ears bent by the bloke in the suit. Dad’s a big feller, over six feet tall, and works as a security guard. No one messes with him! When they see him approaching, the lads look like they’re about to have kittens.

‘Come on, you two,’ says Mum with a sigh. ‘Let’s go back to the room and get dressed for lunch.’

She brushes past Nikolos without a word and we’re ushered back to the sunbeds to pick up our stuff. Sal, having pushed her hair out of her eyes, blows Nikolos a kiss. He shrugs and turns away to the bar.

‘*Sal!*’ snaps Mum. ‘Stop dawdling and come on! Ali, drink some water. You’ll have to have a cool shower, I’m sure you’ve caught too much sun...’

‘Oh, stop fussing, Mum!’ I grumble.

Dad catches up with us while we wait for the lift in the hotel lobby. I wonder if he’s left the lads floating in pieces in the pool, but I can’t hear any screams of terror. He tells Mum the lads

won't be giving us any more trouble, and while they're busy talking, Sal grabs my arm and hisses, 'You wait! I'll get you back for today!'

It's at that moment I decide to have one of my seizures.

¹Carroll, Lewis. (1865). *Alice's adventures in wonderland*. London: Macmillan.