

The door had never been locked before. Or rather, it had never been locked by my family or me. I knew this door was the entry to my new life, but I was scared to step inside and close it because that meant we would have to lock it behind us, officially leaving behind my old life. I was going to be the first to step inside.

“This is it,” I told myself. “Just walk inside. You can do it.” But instead, I stood and took a long look at the door. It was kind of weird that it was *the* door; the one my parents had schemed and dreamed about since I was nine. It was right in front of us, dingy, brown, and dusty. We had electricity but no lights were turned on, so even though the door was open, I couldn’t see inside. We had been living in a homeless shelter and now we could finally buy a house.

“Go on, Monica,” my mom prodded me gently. I gingerly stepped inside. The house was small, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen and a living area. My parents followed me inside.

“Uh... at least we have all summer to fix it up,” my dad said in that fake cheerful voice of his. “Plus, I have a part-time job, so we can get some better furniture, and some paint...” I half heard him say as his voice trailed off.

This house was not what I expected. It was so ugly. But, lucky for us, it came with furniture, and even a TV!

I pushed open the door to my room. It was painted light purple; my favorite color! I pulled open the curtains on the window, and I saw two girls playing in the warm Florida ocean. One had short copper color hair, and the other was African-American with ringlets that fell just past her shoulders. All of the sudden, I got a great idea. These girls look about my age so maybe they’d like to be friends.

“Mom,” I called out, “can I walk down to the beach?”

“Oh honey, I don’t know. It’s so far!” My mom was looking uneasy as I stepped back into the kitchen where she was starting dinner.

I put on the best pleading face I could muster. I urged, “But I’m already twelve! It’s not *that* far. You can see it from my window. Plus, I’ll come back before dinner!” I kept the pleading look on my face and was considering getting on my knees when I glanced up and saw her slowly nod *yes*.

“But you have to finish unpacking tonight instead of reading in bed,” she warned me.

“Oh thank you so much!” I said as I planted a kiss on her cheek. I changed into my bathing suit and was out the door before she could change her mind.

The warm breeze whipped my dark brown hair around my face and I squinted up to look at the sun which just disappeared behind some fluffy white clouds. The water was a beautiful turquoise and I saw a big wave rolling in. I watched as one girl, a surfer, rose on her board. She looked as though she didn't have a care in the world. *What I would give to be her!* I thought.

As I reached the shore, the water lapped playfully at my toes. I waded in deeper and waved to the girls. One glanced up and waved but the other one didn't see me. They came in to shore.

"Hi!" the same girl who waved at me said. "Are you new here? Grab your board and join me, I mean us."

"Um...I...my name is Monica," I finally stumbled out. I always get nervous talking to new people. "And actually, I don't have a surfboard."

"That's okay. I've got one you can borrow. Oh, and by the way, I'm Erin." Erin pointed to the girl who wasn't surfing standing beside her. "And that's Pita." Pita glanced up, and I saw for the first time that her eyes were clouded over.

"You're blind!" I gasped. "But how do you surf? How do you swim? Do you have one of those seeing-eye dogs?" I blabbered on, then bit my tongue. I didn't want to hurt Pita's feelings.

Pita calmly explained that her full name was Pita McAllister, and she was born and adopted from Africa at age three. She could see until she was six and never had a seeing-eye dog.

"And no, I don't surf," she replied as she jerked her head in Erin's direction. "She was supposed to help me swim, but she just had to surf. Meanwhile, I got crushed by a huge wave."

Pita put on a grin, but I could tell she was mad at Erin. Pita opened her mouth as if to say something else, but Erin started to speak again first. I felt bad for Pita who looked as though she was very annoyed, but I pushed the thoughts away and concentrated on what Erin was saying.

"...so then you just stand on your board and ride that wave!" she exclaimed.

"What? Sorry. Could you repeat that?" I asked.

Erin rolled her eyes and gave a huge sigh but then repeated it. She trotted over to a different part of the beach and returned with two boards. Erin thrust one at me and took off for the water.

“Wait! What about Pita?” I called out. “We can’t just leave her!”

I heard a faint, “Whatever. She’ll be fine.”

I saw sadness flicker through Pita’s cloudy eyes, but I ignored it and took off for the water after Erin. I paddled out after her.

“You know how to surf?” she asked.

I nodded and replied, “I used to do it a lot before we moved to the shelter.”

Erin smirked, “You lived in a homeless shelter?”

“Yeah, but my dad has a part-time job now, and we moved to a house,” I explained.

“Well, at least you aren’t blind like Pita,” Erin said. “I only swim with her ‘cause I get paid for it. I’m actually thirteen and have a regular job looking after her. She’s just a weird, blind, twelve-year-old.”

“I’m twelve.” The words leaped out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Erin gazed at me wide-eyed. “Then you are totally mature for your age, unlike Pita.” Another wave came in, and we rode it together. I was glad to forget about Erin and her mean comments for a while.

The next few weeks I went to the beach every day and surfed with Erin. She sold me her board for a cheap price and quit her job with Pita. Except for her daily bad remarks about Pita, she was being pretty decent.

One day we were sitting and eating some PB&J sandwiches when I saw an unfamiliar car pull up nearby. A woman with blond ringlets stepped out of the driver’s seat.

“Oh, no,” Erin mumbled under her breath. “That’s Pita’s mom!”

Sure enough Pita stepped out of the back seat. Pita’s mom spotted us and waved. I waved back weakly.

They both approached us. “Hello girls! You wouldn’t mind playing with Pita today while I do some shopping, would you?” Pita’s mom smiled at us. “What’s your name honey?” She was looking at me, so I said, “My name is...uh... Monica.”

“This is the girl I told you about, mom,” Pita tugged on her mom’s sleeve.

*Gosh, I thought, Pita told her mom about me?*

“So, Pita could play with you girls, right?” Pita’s mom repeated.

“Would I get paid?” Erin asked nastily.

My head shot up to look at Pita whose eyes were brimming with tears.

“No,” Pita’s mom’s voice was shaky but firm, “No. You wouldn’t.”

Pita’s mom glanced at Erin, then me, and finally at Pita. “I’ll do my shopping another day. But would you still like to stay Pita? I know you love the ocean.”

Slowly, Pita said, “Sure, but you’ll be here, right?”

“I’ll be right over there sitting in the shade,” her mom assured her.

Surprisingly, Pita plopped down on our blanket as her mom walked away.

Erin spoke up, “Come on Monica. Let’s go surf.” She gave me a look that plainly said, *let’s leave Pita behind.*

I hesitated. I thought Pita was nice and all but being friends with Erin would probably be good for when I joined school this fall. I mean, how many girls my age had good friends who were older? Besides, I did want to go surfing. The waves were perfect, and I was dying to ride one.

“Okay,” I said reaching over to grab my board. I tried to avoid looking at Pita, even though she couldn’t see me.

“Then let’s go!” Erin grinned at me.

“Bye, Pita. Uh, we’ll hang out later or something,” I called to her as I started to walk away.

Pita frowned and mumbled, “Everyone says that, but no one does it.”

I ran off to the shore feeling just awful about Pita. I started to catch up with Erin.

“I thought you were actually going to stay behind with Pita,” Erin looked at me and started to laugh as we reached the shore. “How silly is that?”

“Yeah, silly,” I replied with no feeling. I twisted around to look at Pita who was wrapped up in her mom’s arms. Her mom was trying to comfort her. I continued to watch as they got into their car and drove away.

Erin and I surfed for the rest of the day, but I felt no joy from it this time. If only Pita weren’t blind, I wouldn’t be stuck in this mess.

Later, that night, I finally went home. I glared at that door leading into our house. I really wished I never locked it behind me or left my old life behind. Everything was so mixed up. I didn’t know what to do. I wished Erin would just be nice.

“Hey, Monica!” My mom greeted me at the door. “I have great news! Your dad got a full-time job! Isn’t that wonderful?”

It took everything I had, but I managed a tiny smile and big “congratulations” to my dad over dinner. There were my favorite foods, but I could barely choke down a few bites. I just couldn’t stop thinking about today.

Finally, I pulled myself back to the conversation. My dad was telling me that in five days his new workplace would be celebrating “Bring Your Kid to Work Day,” and I was going to go with him.

“Where do you work?” I asked him.

“It’s at a place owned and run by Sarah McAllister. It helps kids with problems like deafness, cancer or being in wheelchairs, stuff like that, forget their problems and have some safe fun. It’s called *Children’s Hope*.”

“Did you say Sarah McAllister?” I gulped.

Dad nodded, not noticing my reaction.

*Oh, no, I thought. Is that Pita’s mom? If it is, this is not good, not good at all!*

For the next few days, I didn’t go to the beach. Instead, I just hung out at home, watched TV, read books, and worried about Monday, which is when “Bring Your Kid to Work Day” was held.

But, Monday came too soon. Dad was super excited to show me where he worked so I tried to be happy. The outside looked really nice with bright colors, a cheerful sign, and a huge playground.

After my dad gave me a quick tour, I asked him where I’d be for the day.

“You will be helping in the blind/deaf center,” he told me. “Along with a few adults, there will be one other girl there.”

“Yes, a friend!” I cheered. Maybe this won’t be so bad after all.

I entered the room marked “Welcome to the fun room! If you are deaf or blind, come on in!” Under the sign, there was the same message in Braille.

I walked in and saw a room of about twenty kids from ages about seven to twelve. The walls were a beautiful mural of kids of boys and girls with disabilities, laughing and playing. I hoped my new friend was nice like all the other kids I saw playing in the room.

All my hope vanished when I saw who the “friend” was. It was Erin, of course. Her mom or dad probably worked there, too.

“Oh, hello, Monica!” Erin greeted me. You got dragged along to this? It’s too bad we have to spend the day with a bunch of losers.”

I glanced around worriedly, but to my relief, none of the kids heard us. Some older girls were beading, and younger ones were playing hopscotch. I also spotted a group of blind kids playing cards in Braille. That’s when I saw Pita. I was pretty sure Erin saw her, too.

“Watch this,” Erin whispered.

Erin walked over to her and made a nasty face just because Pita couldn’t see her. She laughed and Pita’s eyes watered up. She could hear Erin laughing plain as day, and she could probably tell who it was by Erin’s laugh.

*Why does Erin do this?* I wondered. *Pita was just minding her own business.*

“You’re blind you ugly girl,” she hisses in Pita’s face, “so stop your crying.”

I drew in my breath and looked for one of the adults, but I didn’t see one. *Did I risk losing Erin as a friend?* I knew I needed to decide, fast. *Or, did I even want her as a friend?* I marched over to them.

“Erin” I spoke to her slowly and carefully so she would understand me, “you need to stop making fun of Pita, NOW!”

“Why do you care?” Erin challenged me. “I thought you agreed with me!”

“I care because she’s my friend.” It was hard, but I gave Erin my sweetest smile. “And, I’m sure we could all be friends if you’d like to start over.”

“No way!” Erin yelled and stomped away.

“Monica?” Pita whispered. “Are we really friends?”

“Yes! You are the nicest, most inspiring person I have ever met. You lived in Africa until you were three. You became blind at age six. I can’t imagine going through half the stuff you went through, and I’m really sorry I wasn’t very nice to you at first.” I took a big breath.

Pita flashed a real smile at me for the first time. “I’m glad you’re my friend.”

“Me too!” I felt like laughing, singing, and jumping up and down. Instead, I gave Pita a huge hug. As the day went on I realized that locking that door behind me led to the best thing that ever happened to me. I stood up for what was right and made friends with Pita.

THE END