

Cindy Lee The Incredible

Miracles are slippery things, and all the practice in the world only helps so much. Most of the time they just have to happen, or not.

Cindy Lee knew that the deep end of the pool was the very last place she was supposed to be, but for once she did not worry about what Mrs. Lipscomb said. Not even one little bit. She had never known such a wonderful feeling as the cool darkness of the water, spreading over her legs as she paddled from 4 feet deep to 5, 5 to 7, 7 to 9 and finally the white tile at the end with the big 12 twelve on it. She had never known the feeling of water so completely around her. Stretch as she might, her feet could not touch the bottom. It was a whole sea at her command. It must be the same, she thought, floating in outer space. It was a place to do great wonders. She had taught herself dozens of little magic spells for getting through the day, but water was her specialty.

All through the spring Cindy Lee had been working on the rain. It had been wet at Christmas and stayed that way almost until school let out. She was pretty used to thunder and hardly ever afraid of it anymore. Still, she often had to give the order ten or eleven or twenty-six times for the storm to pay attention and stop. Once, Cindy Lee had given up her chant, "Stop rain, no more rain," after one hundred and seventy three times, and the rain had made Mama almost two hours late getting home. Cindy Lee was sick with disappointment in herself all evening. On the other hand, seven times since she had begun the ritual, the words had worked on the very first try. Once, she had shouted it into a downpour so thick it hid the lawn from view out the front window. By "no more rain" the sun was shining. That blessed evening she and Mama had baked cookies together. Even her brother Charlie helped. She kept the memory stored in the most important part

of her. It was the kind of magic that could be counted on in real trouble.

Remembering that day like sweetness on her tongue, Cindy Lee kicked her legs furiously, trying to start a whirlpool but only turning herself in one slow circle. Maybe she should try deeper down. She peered across the pool, where Mrs. Lipscomb still dozed in the sun. She would have a sunburn on her nose when she woke up, and that was okay with Cindy Lee. Flipping herself like a dolphin, she began to dive over and over again, straining to push herself deeper toward the bottom of the pool with every try. Holding her breath was no problem. What she needed was longer arms and legs.

Cindy Lee firmly believed that one day, when she grew big enough, she'd be able to make the world just the way it ought to be. She was doing pretty well already, even if her miracles had to be small for the moment. There were already signs that things were changing.

"Look at my big girl," Mama had said in the mirror last week, as she brushed Cindy Lee's hair before bed, taming the thin straight sunshine-colored strands with just a little tinge of autumn red, which were really getting quite long now. Cindy Lee liked watching it fall across her shoulders. She and Mama had the same hair exactly, which is how Cindy Lee had always known for certain that Mama was hers.

Charlie had short dark brown hair, almost black, so he could have come from anywhere. But once when Cindy said this, to sting him for some mean thing he had done, Mama had told her firmly "Charlie is ours too," and not to say things that hurt people who are ours. Cindy Lee had not expected her own words to have such power. She'd thought Charlie would laugh at her, and had not known Mama was listening at all. But Charlie looked stunned, and swallowed hard like

something bad had got in his mouth. And Mama heard everything; she hadn't known then but she sure did now. Mama heard the tiny clink of a cookie jar carefully opened across the house, and she could make herself heard clearly without having to yell. Mama almost never yelled. Maybe at work she had to, but at home she liked peace and quiet best.

Cindy Lee was also sure Mama could hear the quiet things Mrs. Lipscomb mumbled sometimes, shaking her head slowly, when Mama left the room. Mrs. Lipscomb was an old lady with hair that was sort of purple and didn't cover her head very well. She came during the day to look after Cindy Lee and Charlie, while Mama went to work. And she mumbled a lot. Cindy Lee didn't think it was nice not to speak right out loud to people, but Mama never complained about Mrs. Lipscomb or told them to do anything but mind what she said.

At night, when they had each other to themselves, Mama did not seem interested in talking about Mrs. Lipscomb, which was okay with Cindy Lee. Instead she liked to say sweet, silly things like, "Look at my big girl."

Cindy Lee giggled. She knew from the doctor that she was just under four feet tall, which was almost big (maybe) but still too little to climb the fence at the spot where Charlie could now pull himself over. Cindy Lee told Mama she wasn't so big yet, leaving out the part about the fence because Mama didn't like them doing that.

"Well," said Mama, drawing Cindy Lee into her lap, "I say you're just the perfect size."

Cindy Lee had felt the same way once, but not so much lately. Charlie was getting taller for sure, which put him closer to things she could not reach or was not allowed to touch. This seemed to break a deeper, unspoken set of rules, to leave Cindy Lee behind like that.

Charlie wasn't all bad. He liked to dig up snakes and worms and bugs (the first two were no bother to her, but things with too many legs scared her to death). He made gross noises and peed in the shower. He liked to prove how much better he was at climbing, which wasn't fair because he was bigger. But he was good at reading and would usually do it if she asked him, even just as a favor to Mama. Some nights, after long days, she liked to go to bed early.

The best thing Charlie did was teach her to swim, sort of. That had become an important part of her summer, and even though he mainly teased her and shoved her in the water for the fun of it, the determination to show him she wasn't afraid was all she really needed to dive in on her own and not be afraid.

Cindy Lee was pleased with the magic she had learned to work on rainstorms, but she worried that too much magic at once could break things. The summer had gone completely dry, with not so much as a drop of dew in the morning. It made sense to swim as much as possible, because even with the fans going in the afternoon the house was not much nicer than outside.

She would have really liked swimming, not just put up with it, if not for two things. The first was that the shallow end of the pool was as warm as a fresh bath in the middle of July. Jumping from the burning hot concrete into a piping bowl of chlorine soup sometimes made her sick to her stomach. She only went in because the only thing more miserable would be not to get in the water. An hour after lunchtime there was zero shade, and even though the pool had a swing set and slide and sandbox right nearby, there was no way to play on any of these without frying your fanny.

The hour after lunchtime was when they had to go swimming, because that's when Mrs. Lipscomb liked to smoke her cigarettes. Mama didn't let guests, even Mrs. Lipscomb, smoke in the

house or near it. Mrs. Lipscomb once told Charlie the cigarettes were medicine for her "heart condition," whatever that meant. If she had told that to Mama, Cindy Lee felt sure Mama would allow her to smoke in the house, but it never came up and that was okay with Cindy Lee. Cigarettes were even worse than regular medicine because they spread out everywhere and made Mrs. Lipscomb smell even older.

She would sit and smoke and read a magazine and not pay much attention to either of them unless Charlie splashed her feet, or Cindy Lee strayed away from the shallow end, where the big number 4 painted on the tile told her that the pool would be deeper than she was tall.

Sometimes even when Mrs. Lipscomb looked asleep, she would point her cigarette at Cindy Lee and croak in her frog's voice, "Cindy! Not so far. You'll drown and I'm too old and fat to jump in and save you."

Cindy Lee knew that was probably true, but she also thought Charlie would help if she did start drowning. At least she only had to follow these rule for about an hour a day, bored and stewing alive.

The second disappointment about swimming was Charlie's new friend, a nasty kid named Max Briggs with curly blond hair like a little angel on a calendar, who always had a brand new squirt gun or snorkel or toy car to show off, and used his toys to torment Cindy Lee in creative ways. On the rare occasions he let Cindy Lee play with them, he was bossy. He had no brothers or sisters and borrowed Charlie all for himself when they met each other at the pool. Max also had a silent hatred, maybe even fear, for Mrs. Lipscomb, who had no problem giving him a sharp warning if he got rowdy. She quietly called him a rotten little lord when she, Charlie and Cindy Lee

walked home from the pool.

Mrs. Lipscomb was no fun really, but she spent her days looking after them and helping Mama, and Cindy Lee loved her for that. Cindy Lee and Charlie didn't like to smoke or read magazines or drink tea in front of the soaps, so spending time with them must have been boring for her too. She always fixed them something to eat and left them alone if they were quiet around the house, and once in a while would tell them a story about how much something cost when she was a little girl. Cindy Lee would rather have had Mary Poppins, but she thought Mrs. Lipscomb must be doing her best. And because she helped, it meant Mama could work and make money and come home and fix something something nicer to eat for supper.

Charlie avoided Mrs. Lipscomb whenever he could, and said mean things about her when only Cindy Lee was around to hear. He called her a wrinkly old bat and a flabby pig and one time the B word. Cindy Lee had almost wet her pants, that made her so upset. She begged Charlie not to say it again. Mrs. Lipscomb smelled bad and was not that nice but she took care of them for Mama and--

"Well I hate her," Charlie insisted. "She feels sorry for Mama and thinks she's better because all she has to do is sit around all day on her fat butt."

He ran off to climb a tree. Cindy Lee stayed behind to cry a little bit for Mama and Mrs. Lipscomb. Charlie was ten and hated a lot of things. When he wanted to, he could be kind of a butt himself.

Mrs. Lipscomb had found her just as she was done being upset, and her breath whistled out in a long, stale breeze. "Oh dearie," she rasped, "What's the matter now."

That was just how she said it, not asking but saying, like she didn't really want an answer. It made Cindy Lee feel very small when grownups talked that way. For a moment she felt her face get red hot and she thought about tattling on Charlie, which would make Mrs. Lipscomb mad and get Charlie in big trouble. Holding the explosion in, she shook her head hard, expecting Mrs. Lipscomb to insist she tell what the trouble was.

Instead, Cindy Lee felt crinkly fingers tap the top of her head twice lightly, as though stubbing out one of those long thin cigarettes. Cindy Lee didn't look up. Mrs. Lipscomb said again, "Oh, dearie," and shuffled back into the living room. Cindy Lee was still standing there when she heard the couch cushions shifting around. The volume on the TV rose slowly. The show had a lady with a voice like Mrs. Lipscomb's, yelling about a doctor and some money.

After a while Cindy Lee went to her room and lay down with Mr. Puffs, the big soft dragon Mama had given her two Christmases ago. She did not feel like seeing what Charlie was up to. The TV show sounded like a drag, and right now she couldn't take another "Oh, dearie."

Oh, dearie.

Lying quietly with Mr. Puffs under one arm, Cindy Lee started to think about how many times Mrs. Lipscomb said those words. That summer it had been a lot. She seemed to be running out of other things to say, except when she called out her orders to stay put in four feet of soupy water. It made her sound tired – tired of Cindy Lee, tired of sitting by the pool, tired of their nice house with its familiar smells. She kept coming back day after day, but "oh, dearie" was taking over.

No longer "Why look at your lovely little farm! Can you color it in for me now?" Not

"Goodness, honey. Did you hurt yourself?" And certainly not "There, there. No need for tears." This was how Cindy Lee remembered Mrs. Lipscomb from long ago. Now it was "Oh, dearie, hadn't you better have your nap now? Oh, dearie, try and be more careful. Oh, dearie, what's the matter with you now?" It seemed silly to go to her for help at all anymore.

Diving, kicking, gasping, diving, reaching, Cindy Lee could feel herself getting closer to the bottom with every try. The cold water still felt good, but she felt how far away the sun was getting, and as the water grew deeper it pressed in on her lungs, making it harder to hold in breath. She spent a shorter and shorter time underneath before she had to race back to the surface. She was not afraid, but she knew the pool was testing her. She would have to fight it, the way she fought rainstorms with what Mama called "will power" and what Mrs. Lipscomb called "plain stubbornness."

Even Mama got an "oh, dearie" now and then. Once, when Cindy Lee was playing with her memory cards on the hall floor, not meaning to listen but just there by accident, she had heard Mama in the kitchen telling Mrs. Lipscomb something about a letter or an envelope coming late that month. When Cindy Lee peered around the corner, Mama looked sad about it, maybe even embarrassed. Mrs. Lipscomb glanced at Cindy Lee but did not say hello or seem to notice her. She turned to look at Mama and did one of her long breaths. All she said was "Oh, dearie," which did not make Mama feel better.

It must have been an important letter, because anytime Mama had an envelope for Mrs. Lipscomb she made sure to hand it over as soon as she came through the door. Mrs. Lipscomb did not get mad when Mama showed up without the letter that day. She just...

oh, dearie.

But it must have been bothering her, because the next day after Mama left for work, Cindy Lee came into the kitchen to ask please for some orange juice, and found Mrs. Lipscomb with a letter in her hand. She had taken it from the pile where Mama kept the mail for the house. It was not open but Mrs. Lipscomb held it up against the window. The sunlight showed some of the writing inside.

When she noticed Cindy Lee, Mrs. Lipscomb dropped the letter right away and seemed to forget all about it. She fixed them each a glass of orange juice, with a little plate of shortbread cookies to share. She acted especially nice to Cindy Lee that day, even though she had been frowning at what she could see in the letter. She must have thought the envelope was for her, although Mama brought those home from work. Mrs. Lipscomb's letters were always blank. All the ones at home, the ones the mailman brought, had Mama's name written on them. Cindy Lee knew that. She was learning to read.

The truth had come out a few days after, while she and Charlie were having another argument. Charlie said something nasty when Mrs. Lipscomb caught him sneaking snacks, and instead of going up to his room like she told him, he ran and climbed up on the fence, sitting there like a buzzard while Cindy Lee pleaded with him to come down.

"I hope she just drops dead," Charlie called down. "She hates us and wouldn't care if we did."

"Don't say that!" cried Cindy Lee. "If she didn't care why would she come see us every day?"

"Don't be stupid. She only does that because Mom pays her to."

A cold prickly thing crawled down Cindy Lee's throat. For a moment, she lost her voice completely, then in a quiet shaky voice she answered, "That's a lie. And I'm... not stupid."

She did not want to believe it, but it made sense. Charlie said that Mama brought home checks from the bank to give to Mrs. Lipscomb, even though all Mrs. Lipscomb needed money for was cigarettes and hair dye and magazines full of ugly people.

Cindy Lee had worried she would throw up, so she left Charlie on his angry perch and ran inside to her bathroom. She stayed there until she was sure lunch would stay down, then went to bed with Mr. Puffs and her big world atlas until Mama came home. Mama had taken her temperature, but by then everything was okay.

After a day or two, Cindy Lee forgot some details of that dreadful afternoon, because she had begun thinking up new miracles to practice. But she could not forget the sickness in her stomach. She did not know the word "betrayal" yet, but in her heart she understood the idea now. She had stuck up for Mrs. Lipscomb because she believed the old lady cared for them out of the goodness of her heart.

At first she could not help thinking of bad things she might make happen to Charlie and Mrs. Lipscomb. Not really bad like lightning strikes or car accidents, but things like scraped knees or electric shocks from the carpet. When she was done feeling sorry for herself, she realized this would be the wrong way to use her gift. Then she thought about trying to make the rain come back, for weeks and weeks like a Bible flood so that even Mrs. Lipscomb would be carried away over the sea. But going back on all the work she had done to make it stop raining seemed as bad as hurting people she cared about. It was a waste. Good magic was about moving forward and

learning new things. She asked Mr. Puffs about it and he kept his usual wise silence, but seemed to agree. Let the weather do what it wanted.

Which it did. The next morning, when Cindy Lee was wishing up just a few comforting clouds to hide the rising sun, the sky had gone black and a hard summer shower came down, only for a little while. Cindy Lee was concerned that Mama would be late for work, but relieved that she had not broken the rain for good. During the night she'd had an idea for her next miracle, but forgotten most of it in a dream. It had been about the swimming pool.

Soon after the big rain, the pool was where Charlie and Cindy Lee were bound. They knew that it would be cloudy and pleasant for a few more hours, and Mrs. Lipscomb's heart was dying for a smoke. To take her mind off it she'd even made coffee with a raw egg and a lot of brandy in it. Cindy Lee was glad to see her trying new remedies for her heart trouble, though she didn't much care for the smell of the brandy either.

The medicine had relaxed Mrs. Lipscomb so completely that she fell asleep in her chair by the pool with half a cigarette between her lips. It fell out onto the ground before it could burn her mouth, but Cindy Lee had watched, just in case.

That was when she'd gotten the idea about exploring the deep end. It might be her only chance to see what swimming out of her depth was like. She was amazed by how quickly the water around her feet turned cool, the deeper she swam. Once she had reached the twelve-foot end, she knew she never wanted to swim in the shallows again. Maybe if she applied her mystical knowledge to growing some gills, Mrs. Lipscomb would leave her alone about it.

Max and Charlie were horsing around on the deep end ladder, ignoring her, taking turns

trying to climb it while the other stood at the top trying to shove him off. Mrs. Lipscomb would have put a stop to that, telling them what a great way it was to crack your head open and drown. If one of them did drown, she hoped it would be Max. Charlie knew things like how to catch toads, and the right way to put peanut butter on toast. He learned that from Mama. When Mrs. Lipscomb put peanut butter on toast, it tasted wrong somehow and Cindy Lee could only finish half. She dove again, hoping to be underwater when Mrs. Lipscomb woke up. They were all out of bounds now, and there would be trouble.

Just as she was starting to tire out for good, she found the strength to push a tiny bit deeper. With her heart beating in her feet, she felt the tip of her longest finger scrape lightly against the rough bottom of the pool. She gave an underwater a cry of joy. She did not know exactly what it meant, but something miraculous had begun.

Cindy Lee did not grow gills during her first twelve-foot dive, but it was a triumph and a miracle anyway. She worried for a moment that she might run out of air and drown on the way back up, which would be a real disappointment after coming so far. "Faster, faster," she told herself, "rise up faster" with her limbs flailing toward sunlight, and to her surprise the distance was not nearly as great on the upward trip as on the downward.

Bursting to the surface, she felt her heart race, her ears ring, her head go light and bubbly, and all she could think of was making the dive again. She still felt a little dizzy when she drew breath and plunged down again. This time it took her maybe half as long to go down and up. It was so much easier. After three or four times, she could feel her toes still scraping the bottom as she paddled around the surface. *I'm growing*, she thought, a little disappointed in not having gills but

amazed at what she had accomplished. It was some feeling to know that twelve feet was really nothing at all. Underwater, she was a giant.

Just then, she heard Mrs. Lipscomb shriek her name across the pool, then Charlie's. The old lady was awake, and boy was she mad. Ordinarily, Cindy Lee would have cringed at the sound and started crying. It still wasn't a very nice sound, but somehow Cindy Lee did not mind it today. Let Mrs. Lipscomb holler and squawk and think she knew better. Soon it would be Saturday, and Cindy Lee would come swimming with Mama, just the two of them, and show her how to grow twelve feet tall. Mama let her swim where she wanted. How proud and utterly amazed she would be!

Cindy Lee resolved to start climbing fences and trees, even if Mrs. Lipscomb gave her grief and even if it meant falling off a few times. If the miracle worked underwater, she felt sure that with a little practice, she could also be a giant on dry land.

Paddling back across the pool, where Mrs. Lipscomb wagged her finger and stamped her feet, Cindy Lee smiled sweetly. She could not wait for tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Pretty soon they would both understand which one of them was the biggest.