



# THE INFINITE



PATIENCE AGBABI



CANONGATE



∞ Chapter 01:00 ∞

**ELLE**

Something bad just happened and I want to leap back in time to make it unhappen.

But you're not supposed to solo leap till you're 3-leap, which is 12 years old for Annuals.

I won't be 3-leap until the 29th of February. Three days' time.

I just ran out of double geography and now I'm in the corridor. I'm tongue-tied and my face is burning red with humiliation and I can still hear Mr Carter's old, creaky voice in my memory: 'Elle, where are you going?'

I check my watch: 15:01, Wednesday 26 February.

I close my eyes to block out the muffled shouts from the classroom, the yellow walls of the corridor, the smell of sweat and all the bad thoughts colliding in my head about the bad thing that happened AND getting into trouble for running out of a lesson.

I'm THINKING about leaping back in time so the bad thing won't happen. I don't MEAN to leap. That would be wrong.

When I have that thought, another one comes into my mind at the same time. Will athletics club still be on tonight? It's usually 5 o'clock on a Wednesday, but someone said it might be cancelled. I imagine doing running round the track to keep myself calm and it feels like it's actually happening. My body goes fizzy, charged up like a battery. Something very strange is happening to me. My body isn't any bigger but it's much stronger. I'm no longer Elle, I'm Elle to the power of 3! My head begins to spin so fast I stop thinking about running. I try to think about nothing at all but I've never felt so happy, like I could take on the whole world.

I clasp my hands tight.

Everything goes dark.

I hear a door open.

Classroom chatter pours out, like a tidal wave.



I open my eyes. Things slowly come into focus, like my eyes are a camera. I'm sitting on the grass by the school track, next to the long-jump pit. My watch says 17:00. My mouth is a capital O. I just leapt 1 hour 59 minutes into the future!

I feel dizzy, like I've been in the spin dryer at the laundrette and my skin's still damp. When I try to move, I throw up all over the grass. But it doesn't make me sad; it makes me feel better. I look around me. No one's doing slow jog or high knees. No one's spinning in the discus circle. Athletics really is off tonight. So, nobody saw me appear out of thin air; nobody saw me leap from the corridor.

Only you and I know what just happened.

I'm tongue-tied with everyone. Except you. It's easier talking to you because I don't know what you look like or if your eyes are rolling clockwise or anticlockwise because I said something odd or rude like 'How many days have you suffered from acne?'

I'm autistic, so sometimes I'm very direct or say the wrong thing at the wrong time. But I LOVE words, the sound and shape of them and how they feel on my tongue. And I love sprinting and long jump because it's the closest you get to flying. And when I TALK about sprinting and long jump, it's like the words come to life and I'm pounding down the runway, launching myself into the air. It's the best thing ever.

I like it here beside the track. If I was a millionaire, I'd build my house right here.

How fast can you run the 100 metres? My PB's 13.12 seconds, which gives me an 89.59% age grade. That means I'm almost in the top 10% in the world for 11 year olds. I want to run in the Olympics and stand a good chance because I'm a Leapling with The Gift and the Olympics only happens in a leap year.

My favourite Olympics is Mexico City, 1968.

My favourite athlete of all time is Bob Beamon.

Bob Beamon made a world record in the long jump of 8.90 metres at the 1968 Olympics.

They had to send someone out of the stadium to buy an old-fashioned tape measure so they could measure the jump properly.

Mr Branch, my athletics coach, says it was the most political Olympics since 1936, when Jesse Owens got four gold medals

and made Hitler leave the stadium. In 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos did the Black Power salute wearing black gloves on the medal podium and got suspended from the US team. Dick Fosbury raised his fist during his medal ceremony in solidarity with Black Power. Dick Fosbury was white. He invented a new way of doing the high jump called the Fosbury Flop.

But the best part of the 1968 Olympics was Bob Beamon's jump.



It's 17:10 and Grandma will be home in 20 minutes, so I need to run home. There's still frost on the opposite pavement and cracked ice on the puddles, even though the sun came out today. I love weather like this. It doesn't happen very often in February. Usually it's grey, cloudy and damp. I wonder what the weather will be like in the future. If it gets warmer, we won't get frost any more and people will read about it in history books.

I suddenly realise how cold it is, that I leapt out of school without my coat and now school's closed. But you don't need a coat if you're running. You just run and run and run and feel warm inside and the air feels cool on your skin. I grab my bag and run across the school fields, the frost crunching under my feet, jump over the fence like in the steeplechase and start running up the tree-lined drive that leads to the Hill. You'd think after leaping I'd be tired but it's the opposite. I feel like I could run a marathon.

It's not a steep hill but it goes on for ages. It's next to the main road, and there isn't much traffic, so it really is like running a

marathon in the Olympics when they get rid of the traffic so the runners don't get run over. But I don't run on the road, I run on the path. The council haven't cut the hedge so I have to be careful not to get cut on the thorns.

There's lots of houses on both sides of the road with their windows boarded up and piles of rubbish stinking in the gardens. You know people still live there because the bins are overflowing. Grandma says they're flats where they put criminals when they come out of prison and have no money. The bins smell horrible. The council never empty them. I breathe through my nose, even though Mr Branch says it's better to breathe through your mouth to get more oxygen. It's hard running uphill with a schoolbag full of books, my geography project which I didn't hand in, my yam and my PE kit.

When I reach the top of the hill, I'm in the zone. The zone is when you get into your running rhythm and forget where you are. I like being in the zone. It feels safe, like being under the table when I want to calm down. But there's a car horn hooting, hooting, hooting. I turn my face to see a bright red car and a woman with long ginger hair. It's Mrs C Eckler, my favourite teacher. She stops, winds down the window and says something about school and athletics and giving me a lift but I'm panicking that I won't be home before Grandma, who will find out athletics wasn't on and wonder why I didn't get home earlier. Panic makes me hear her words in the wrong order and my heart starts thumping. Lots of cars are queuing behind her, hooting their horns. It's all too much. I accelerate away like Usain Bolt.

The path's level now. I run past the shops, the newsagent's, the Indian grocer's, the Polish deli that had its windows smashed

in so there's cardboard in their place. Someone sprayed graffiti onto it in a foreign language I don't understand. We buy bread there sometimes because it's nicer than the bread in the supermarket and the same price. I start to relax now that I can't hear those cars hooting like an orchestra from hell.

I'm in the centre of town now. I run through the Pound Emporium, even though the floor's slippery and the flickering overhead lights always give me a headache, and out the other side to the car park, where they sometimes have a market selling bruised fruit. I go this way because there aren't as many people. I run past the big supermarkets we never go to because Grandma's leg pains her when she walks more than 200 metres, and on past the industrial estate.

This is the best part of town. Old, grey buildings used by businesses, and no people. It's the best place to run. The windows look like eyes with no sockets and sometimes big lorries go in making a rumbling noise like they've taken over from human beings.

We live in a flat on the other side of the industrial estate in a row of houses nicknamed 'The Mush-Rooms'. I think they're called that because the walls are so damp mushrooms grow out of them. Our landlord's Italian and he doesn't charge the same rent as the English ones. Most of the people who live there are Nigerian or Polish, except Mrs Leggett, who acts like she owns the place. The houses are terraced, so I can hear what people are saying in the next flat, though Grandma says that's not possible with old houses. But I can.

I'm starting to get tired but have a second wind when The

Mush-Rooms come into view. I do a sprint finish and only stop running when I reach our front door, number 36.



When she comes through the flat door, even though she's out of breath from walking up the stairs, Grandma sings 'Elle Bibi-Imbelé!' and looks at me with her what-big-eyes. Most people just call me Elle. My full name is Elle BÍbi-Imbelé Ifiè. I write it with accents so people say it properly but they still get it wrong. Ifiè means time in Izon, which is a Nigerian language. Bibi-Imbelé means mouth-sweet, as in sweet-talking. I like having time as one of my names and I like sweet-talking, except when I'm tongue-tied, and I love Elle because it's a palindrome like Hannah. It reads the same backwards and forwards. Before she died, Mum called me Elle after the fashion magazine.

Grandma says Mum died before I was born. But that doesn't make sense, does it? Grandma says Mum was in a coma after the car crash, so it was like she was dead. Maybe that's what she means. After Mum died, my dad went back to Nigeria and married someone else. I don't miss my mum or dad because I don't remember them. Grandma's like a mum to me. She's very short for a grown-up.

I was the same size as Grandma two years ago. People say 'Elle, you're tall for your age' but they don't know my TRUE age. I'm not 11 going on 50 like Mr Branch says. I'm two going on three. I bet you've guessed why. I'm a bissextile, a Leaper, or Leapling. I only celebrate my birthday every four years.





called Big Ben because of his height and obsession with timing things.

Big Ben has a stopwatch that times things down to two decimal points. He times me doing the 100 metres even when I don't want him to. He can't help it. He times EVERYTHING. And throws chairs when he goes from 0 to 10 on the anger scale. Big Ben's already been excluded from two schools. At his first school, he overturned his desk and books went everywhere. He'd only just started Second Year but was very strong. He went to the same primary school as me after that. In Sixth Year, he threw a chair because the teacher told him off for talking when he wasn't. It landed on the teacher's desk and snapped like firewood. Everyone cheered except the teacher and me. I missed him when he left.

Intercalary International's his last chance. After that, it's the Pupil Referral Unit. That's a school for children who get excluded and they can't find another school to take them on. I worry Big Ben will end up there one day. He never remembers to do time-out. When I do time-out, I do running round the playground or the athletics track. He doesn't throw chairs at people now, though, just at tables or chairs with no one sitting in them. Zero occupancy.

Big Ben's favourite car is a Lamborghini Asterion, which goes from 0 to 60 in three seconds, but his ambition is to time its acceleration down to a nanosecond. That's a billionth of a second. His uncle's a second-hand-car dealer. Last year he told Big Ben he'd teach him to drive when he was tall enough. He didn't expect that Ben would grow 6 inches that year. Now Big Ben can drive better than his uncle, even though he's exactly the same age as me and it's illegal to drive a car until you're 17.

Everyone thinks he's my boyfriend but he's not. I hang out with him because he's clever and kind and times me when I'm running. He says I'm the best sprinter in athletics club because I'm faster than boys the same age. Once I was crying at school because Pete LMS kept repeating everything I said in a silly voice so the teacher gave him detention. Big Ben gave me one of his socks straight off his foot. It was dark grey, at least a size 10 and smelled of cheese. I hid it in my bag because people might make more fun of me but it made me feel much happier. Big Ben doesn't care what people think. He'd never give me perfume or flowers just because I'm a girl. He says 'Am I your boyfriend?' 100 times a day.



Grandma's plaiting my hair before bed. I love it when she plaits my hair, even when she cornrows it so tight that I can't close my eyes in bed for the first night. She says it must last a long time so the tighter the better, but it pulls my skin so I look like I've had a facelift. It takes days for my face to feel normal!

Tonight, she's doing single plaits I can comb out in the morning. I sit on the floor and she sits on the sofa behind me, combs my hair with the afro comb, then the fine-tooth comb to divide it into sections. She massages pomade into my scalp, which smells like tar but in a good way. Some of the other pomades used to make me sick so we only buy this one. When I start shuffling on my bottom, shifting from one side to the other

because I find it hard to sit still on the prickly carpet, Grandma sucks her teeth.

'Elle Bibi-Imbelé! You are too antsy-pantsy. Sit, not run-o!'

Grandma likes singing my name. Tonight, she's happy. I know she's happy because she's singing whilst plaiting my hair AND she doesn't have to work hard to pull it tight when she's tired after a day of cleaning because it only has to last till the morning. I'm happy too because it won't feel like a facelift and I'll be able to close my eyes in bed.

But when I get into bed and close my eyes I don't sleep, I worry.

I worry Mrs C Eckler was so offended I ran away from her she'll stop being nice to me in school and won't be my favourite teacher any more.

I worry someone will find out about the illegal leap and arrest me and send me to a Young Offenders Unit, which is prison for teens, though I'm not 3-leap yet.

But most of all I worry about the bad thing that happened at school.

I open my eyes wide to make the bad thoughts go away but it doesn't make any difference. My mind plays back today like a film on a loop. Each time I see it, it's exactly the same as the first time. Every sight, every sound, every smell. It's bad because, even though I now know it's going to happen, I don't know what it means.

Today I got a text from the future!



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