

Exuvia

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The tip of Izzy's toe grazed the drop-off as she waded toward the deep end of the pool. Cold water flooded her shoulders, soothing sunburn as it licked its way up the sides of her neck. She dipped underwater, muting the hum of insects and the voices of the unwelcome men.

When she surfaced, the smell of grilled meat made her stomach twist with hunger.

One of the men stood over the grill at the far side of the patio. He was a recent college graduate who, like the others, had started gathering by the pool in the early evenings, much to the girls' dismay.

The entire pool area was in decay, but for Izzy and her friend Annabelle, it was the highlight of the rundown apartment complex where Annabelle lived with her mother. Everything within the chain-link fence—the pool and its surrounding patio, the aging furniture, the concrete planters filled with cigarette butts and dirt—was theirs alone until these men had moved in halfway through the summer.

“Marco!” Annabelle's voice called out.

Izzy plunged back into the peacefulness, cool and weightless. She lingered until she needed air.

“Marco! Marco!”

Izzy watched her friend through chlorine-stung eyes. Annabelle was all reaching arms and wiggling fingers, eyes shut tight and a smile so big that her braces glinted in the late afternoon sunlight.

“Marcoooooo!” Annabelle called again. “Hello? Are we playing?”

Izzy swam underwater, surfacing inches from Annabelle's face. She looked down at her friend's bathing suit and observed the unappealing way it clung to her flat chest. The suit was brown-yellow, the color of an overripe banana, and most definitely one of her mother's thrift-store finds.

The girls had spent the summer convincing themselves that they would be more popular when high school started, but now that it was only a week away, the prospect seemed more hopeless than ever.

“Polo,” Izzy whispered.

Annabelle opened her eyes and laughed. She splashed Izzy playfully, punishment for ruining the game. Izzy used both hands to push a wave toward her friend’s face.

“Hey!” Annabelle said. She grabbed Izzy around the waist and tried to lift her up to dunk her but Izzy was stronger. She locked Annabelle’s elbows behind her, restraining her as she tried to pull her down. They squealed as they wrestled, their slippery bodies twirling and splashing.

Izzy noticed briefly that they had the attention of the men while Annabelle remained oblivious, as always.

“Annabelle!” Izzy saw Mrs. Hammond charging toward the patio.

“Anna, I want you outta the pool right now.”

“Aw, why?” whined Annabelle.

Mrs. Hammond shot a disgusted look toward the table on the far side of the patio.

“Because I said so,” she said. “Now.”

As Annabelle made her way to the side of the pool and hoisted herself out, Izzy floated on her back with ears submerged. Dragonflies crisscrossed the hazy sky. She did not want to go home. There were hours of daylight left.

Izzy took her time, facing the card table as she kicked backward toward the ladder with an air of indifference. She was aware of the man in the blue bathing suit, the one who always manned the grill, watching her as she climbed out, the rust gripping her wrinkled fingers.

Goosebumps rose on Izzy’s arms when she followed Annabelle and her mother into the apartment. While Izzy’s house was sweltering, the air-conditioning in the apartment was on full-blast. On the floor an ancient houseplant in a huge ceramic pot looked like it hadn’t been moved since before Annabelle was born. Mrs. Hammond, heavy herself, matched her furniture. All of it was unmovable, too large for the tiny two-bedroom apartment, and

made of the same dark wood. She cooked heavy too, Izzy thought. She could smell lasagna baking in the oven. She knew how Mrs. Hammond made it, with homemade tomato sauce and bits of sausage and ground beef. Her mouth watered.

“Come with me into the kitchen, Annabelle,” said Mrs. Hammond. “Izzy, go on into Annabelle’s room and get yourself changed to go home.”

“Can’t she stay?” asked Annabelle.

“Not tonight,” said Mrs. Hammond.

Annabelle gave Izzy a sympathetic look but was unwilling to argue the point.

“It’s okay, my parents want me home for dinner,” Izzy lied.

Mrs. Hammond sucked her lips into her mouth.

Izzy slunk into Annabelle’s bedroom. Her mother had given her the larger of the two. Izzy thought about the tiny room she had to share with her sister, Denise, and Baby Ruby. She couldn’t help coveting Annabelle’s full-sized bed and the space that was all her own. It annoyed her that Annabelle didn’t seem to appreciate it, barely bothering to close the door.

Izzy couldn’t remember the last time she had this much privacy. She peeled off her wet bathing suit and pulled on a warm pair of underwear, a pleasant contrast. She stepped in front of the full-length mirror.

She was still slim overall but definitely more round than last summer. Hints of breasts were just beginning to show. If only she had enough money to buy a padded bra to wear on the first day of school. She thought about her crush, a boy named Ricky she hoped would be in her homeroom, as she finished getting dressed. Annabelle would see him every day in advanced math, but she didn’t care anything about boys. She had deemed them unnecessary, Izzy suspected, after a lifetime of fatherlessness.

Mrs. Hammond’s voice was faint in the next room. “You should be ashamed of yourself, putting on a show for those men.”

“But we were just playing in the pool,” Annabelle protested.

Izzy crept to the door, straining to listen.

“Well, I know that you weren’t the one trying to get their attention,” said Mrs. Hammond.

“If she’s hellbent on winding up like her sister, then so be it, but you have too much potential. I’m not gonna let that happen to you.”

Izzy dressed quickly.

“Thank you for having me,” she said as she hurried out, her face burning.

“I’ll call you later,” Annabelle said.

Izzy slung her swim bag over her shoulder and went back to the patio, squinting at the card-playing men who were the cause of the trouble. Her gaze fell on the one in the blue swim trunks who seemed to be the leader of the group. He locked eyes with her as she mounted her bike, giving her a smile and nod that she did not return.

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At home Izzy peered into the refrigerator as her sister, Denise, walked into the kitchen.

“Close that, Izzy, you’re letting all the cold air out,” Denise said.

“Well, I’m starving,” said Izzy. “Where are Mom and Dad?”

“How should I know?” snapped Denise. “I’m only responsible for one other person in this house. If you’re hungry, make yourself something.”

It was as pleasant an interaction as Izzy could expect from Denise, who had been miserable since the day she discovered she was pregnant. Her mood had only gotten worse since Ruby had been born six months ago. The name suited her; she was an angry, red-faced baby who rarely slept more than an hour at a stretch.

Izzy pulled two hot dogs from a slimy plastic bag and microwaved them on a paper towel. She fished an end piece from a half-stale loaf of bread and hunted for the ketchup. She ate the meal while thinking about the lasagna at Annabelle’s house.

Later that night she pulled the phone into the hall closet where her family stored their winter clothes. It was Izzy’s sanctuary, the only place in the house she could have a private conversation. Inhaling the smell of leather and mothballs, she dialed the number her fingers knew by muscle memory.

“What was your mom’s problem?” Izzy asked when Annabelle answered the phone. “She understands that my sister and I are actually two different people, right?”

“She’s just overprotective,” Annabelle said. “She thinks those guys who hang out at the pool are creeps.”

Izzy thought of the way the man in the blue shorts smiled at her.

“Well, we were there first. Why should we have to leave just because they might be perverts?”

“I think she’s just nervous about school starting next week.”

“Why? She isn’t the one who has to go,” Izzy said, moving her father’s coat sleeve out of her face. “Oh, speaking of school, did you get your schedule changed yet?”

Annabelle didn’t respond.

“Hello?” Izzy asked, jiggling the cord. “Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Annabelle said. “Listen, my mom said that she isn’t going to call the school to try to get it changed. Sorry.”

“But we won’t be in the same lunch period!”

“I know. But she thinks that if I switch to sixth period lunch, my blood sugar will get too low and I’ll pass out.”

“But you don’t even have diabetes!”

“She isn’t going to change her mind, Izzy.”

“It’s because she hates me,” Izzy said. “She wants you to make new friends and stop hanging out with me.”

“She doesn’t hate you, but listen—she does have a point. It will be easier to make new friends if we aren’t together at lunch.”

Izzy’s head spun. “How?”

“Well, there are eight people to a table,” Annabelle continued, “so if we sit at the same one, we’ll only meet six new people, but if we sit at different ones, you’ll meet seven people and I’ll meet seven, so that’s fourteen potential friends.”

“You think it’s gonna work like math but it’s not that simple...” She stopped talking to prevent herself from crying. She felt a pang that brought her back to last summer, when Annabelle had been taken to visit her grandmother for three whole weeks. Those long, lonely days had stretched themselves out so painfully that Izzy had taken to calling Annabelle’s number just to imagine the cat starting and scurrying through the maze of plants in the apartment. She felt completely left behind, and now Anna was abandoning her before school had even started.

“Izzy, listen—” Annabelle started to say, but Izzy held down the button on the receiver. She curled herself into a ball and cried among the snow boots on the closet floor.

Ruby stirred as Izzy tiptoed into the bedroom. She held her breath as she pulled the door closed behind her. Denise was snoring on the bottom bunk. Izzy had one foot on the ladder to her bed when Ruby began crying.

Denise’s body stiffened. “Goddamnit, Izzy,” she groaned as Ruby’s cries intensified. “It’s bad enough I don’t have anyone to help me with this fucking baby, but now I have you waking her up as soon as I finally get her to sleep!” She popped out of bed and shook the side of the crib.

“Shhh!” she commanded, raking her fingers violently through her hair. “SHUT UP!”

The terrified baby screamed on.

“I’ll take her,” Izzy said. “You sleep. I woke her up.”

Denise flopped down on the bed while Izzy lifted the baby from her crib. It was true that her sister didn’t get much help. Her parents constantly lectured Denise about being responsible for her own mistakes. After all, nobody had helped them when Denise was a baby or when Izzy’s arrival had surprised them later in life.

Ruby’s screams rattled Izzy’s eardrums as she walked her up and down the hallway. Izzy wished she would stop wailing, but she herself had been crying just minutes before this. She stepped out onto the front porch, and the change of scenery seemed to disrupt Ruby’s senses. Izzy bounced her gently and paced on the porch until her arms ached and the baby’s breaths were slow and even. She kissed her fuzzy head.

“Don’t worry, Ruby,” she whispered to her niece. “I love you. I want you here.”

“So where were you yesterday?” Annabelle asked two days later. They lay side by side on the weather-beaten loungers. “I went to your house, and Denise said you weren’t home.”

“I was out.”

“Out where?”

Izzy’s legs still ached from the long bike ride to the nicer part of town where she knew Ricky lived.

“With another friend, okay? Why do you care?”

“What friend?”

“I have other friends, Annabelle. I have a life outside of you, you know.”

Just then the man in the blue shorts jumped up from the card table as if he had been bitten on the leg.

“Did you see that?” he yelled to his friends. “I just caught this thing in mid-air!” He held up something that was pinned between his thumb and forefinger.

“What is it?” his friends asked.

“A dragonfly, look!”

Izzy listened as the other two men congratulated the one who had captured the insect. She wondered what he would do with it and hoped that he would let it go.

“Dude, I dare somebody to eat this thing,” she heard him say.

If she wasn't so upset with Annabelle, she would have looked at her and rolled her eyes. These grown men were no different from the boys at school, always insulting and challenging each other to do stupid things.

“Hey, buddy,” the man addressed his chubby companion. “Come on, I'll give you a hundred bucks.”

“Yeah, right,” the friend responded. “You don't even have a hundred bucks.”

“You wanna bet?” With his free hand the man with the dragonfly fished his wallet from the back pocket of his trunks and tossed it onto the poolside table.

“I just got paid,” the man said. “I got a hundred-dollar bill in there for you. So you gonna do it?”

“No way,” said the other. “I wouldn't eat that thing for a million bucks.”

Izzy stood. “I'll do it,” she said. Annabelle's mouth hung open in shock and the image delighted Izzy.

“Come on over here,” said the man who held the dragonfly. He held it out.

“You're gonna eat this?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said, feigning confidence, “but I wanna see the money first.”

The man looked impressed. “Show her,” he said to his friends. The third man took the wallet off the table and extracted a bill. He had a pointed face that made Izzy think of a rat.

“Give it to her,” said the dragonfly’s owner.

Izzy took it. The bill was stiff from the mint, sharp enough to give her a paper cut. Its dull green contrasted nicely with her chipped orange nail polish. Her head filled with possibilities: Denise’s green shirt for the first day of the school and the padded bra to fill it out.

“Hold on, hold on.” The chubbiest of the men came closer. “I don’t know if I like this. What if it makes her sick? Is that thing even safe to eat?”

Izzy felt solidarity with him. There was one in every group, and she could tell from the exchange she had just observed that he was one the others picked on.

“It’s not poisonous,” Annabelle said in a small voice.

Izzy cringed and hoped that Annabelle wouldn’t do or say anything embarrassing.

“Green or brown, chow down,” said Annabelle. She shrugged and gave what Izzy recognized as the official Girl Scout sign and salute. The men’s laughter was loud and deep. Izzy knew that the sound of it would draw Mrs. Hammond to the window of her apartment.

Already the sinking sun had turned the sky purple and cast the pine trees into silhouette. She reached for the bug.

“Ah, ah, ah,” said the man as he shook his head. “Not so fast. For a hundred dollars I get to put it in your mouth.”

Izzy placed the money back on the table. She saw the other two men glance at each other. An unspoken agreement passed between them.

She turned her attention back to the one in charge, her eyes tracing the dark line of hair that led down into his bathing suit.

“Let me see it,” she said.

The man held the dragonfly out for her inspection. Ugly words from biology class leapt to her mind—thorax, hindwing, exuvia. The insect buzzed its wings, but even trapped between the man’s fingers, it seemed not to panic. The helmet-like eyes communicated no

interest in its mortality. On the whole it was repulsive, but as she looked at it more closely, she could see the beauty in its individual parts. There was the deep-green metallic paint that decorated its back, and the wings—delicate and iridescent. It was nearing the end of its lifecycle anyway, she told herself. Somewhere in the world people probably ate them fried in coconut oil.

“You ready?” the man asked.

The dusk was in its last gasps. The bats had emerged from their hideaways, and they flapped erratically against the pink sky.

“I’m ready,” she said.

Izzy sat in one of the hard plastic chairs at the card table and closed her eyes. She felt the man’s rough thumb on her chin. She let him guide her mouth open. She was surprised by the heat of his skin and embarrassed by the way her tongue sought out his salty fingers. But then they were gone, replaced only by the frantic beating of wings within the cave of her mouth. She tried unsuccessfully to swallow, but the bristles on the insect’s legs caught in the back of her throat. She had no choice but to chew. She crunched into its body as a bitter taste coated her mouth. She picked up a half-drunk can of beer and took a big gulp, trying to get the bug parts to float. She swallowed.

She resisted the urge to shudder. Adrenaline flooded as she smiled at him. As casually as she could, she tilted her head back and downed the remainder of the beer while the other men hooted and cheered. She didn’t care for the taste of beer, but this sip, untainted by the insect, was sweeter than the first. In triumph she put the can back on the table and looked back at the apartment to make sure that Mrs. Hammond had seen. Sure enough, she was there in the window.

The man picked up the hundred-dollar bill. Izzy stood and put out her palm. The man hesitated. Izzy felt her panic rising. Although he had gotten what he wanted, she could sense his anger and humiliation.

The chubby one stepped forward.

“Give it to her, man,” he said. “She earned it.”

Mrs. Hammond had arrived and Annabelle moved toward her.

Izzy plucked the bill from the man's hand.

She said nothing as she walked over to their chairs and calmly pulled on her clothes. She unlocked her bike and wheeled it toward the gate, forcing Mrs. Hammond to step out of the way. She turned once to look back at Annabelle. She was standing next to her mother, a mix of shock and confusion on her face.

Izzy mounted her bike and turned it in the opposite direction of home. Euphoria lifted her past the discomfort of the ride. Blisters were forming on her sockless feet that had been forced into dry sneakers, and wetness from her bathing suit was soaking into her shorts. She let go of the handlebars and rested her hands on her pumping thighs, the hundred-dollar bill secure in her left pocket. She didn't mind the chill in the air that signaled the end of summer. The first day of school was next week. She was ready. □