

In an abandoned attic four miles south of their whole lives, they find a deer mount stripped of its wood backing and stuffing. Leftover is a hollowed-out stag's head. Imogen, the pale, bone-thin skinheaded one, trotting around in boxers, a sports bra, and her old soccer socks, dons it. She dances blindly through decade-old spiderwebs and dust bunnies. Sophie, still in her daisy-patterned tee, cutoffs, and blood-speckled Reeboks, giggles in the corner. Two dying sconces light the room, the third having already passed on. The thin line of the horizon brightens. Soon, the sun will rise, and a new day will dawn. For now, Imogen dances to the music of Sophie's joy and her own feet. They have forgotten how they got here.

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Sophie and Imogen have known each other their entire lives. They live in a town of mostly dirt roads and stray cigarettes. There is a single elementary school, middle school, and high school. The closest day care center is three towns off.

Imogen has always been a little bit in love with Sophie; her curly brown hair, the inquisitive bend of her eyebrow when she raises her hand in class. This does not make them friends. In fact, they do not become friends until the final weeks of senior year — if you can call polite, tipsy conversation friendship. Imogen has never kept a friend for more than seven and a half weeks, a record held by Kelsey Barber in the sixth grade. Sophie is friends with the girls she sat with on the first day of kindergarten. Her boyfriend Richie has the slowest freestyle time in swim team history, but his attitude is big enough for the captaincy and his dick big enough that his reputation can manage a girlfriend who lives in subsidized housing. He explains this class discrepancy away with four things: Sophie's lips and tits. That's what Imogen hears, anyway. She expects Sophie has not heard this rumor. Richie does seem to dote on her. He tucks her hair behind her ear, drives her to and from school despite her living in the opposite direction. Imogen is unsure of a boy's inner workings even though hers are so similar. And anyway, she has little

reason to think of Richie and less to think of Sophie. She masturbates as needed (every other day), makes middling grades, and is getting the fuck out.

Imogen spots Sophie's back, faded by the sun, at the gas station. She crouches in the weeds, trying to corral a frog to her side of a small creek. A spotted leaf hangs delicately from her fingers.

Imogen asks, "What the fuck is up with your boyfriend?" in reference to an earlier night at Duke Adkins' house. Imogen, high as a kite, lurked on the picnic table shadowed by a beech tree. Across the patchy lawn, she watched Sophie continually try to return inside, dispose of the shitty Pabst in hand, only to be thwarted again and again by Richie's grip on her wrist.

Sophie squints up at Imogen, sun in her eyes. They are both sweating bullets and pretending not to.

Sophie smiles with half her pink mouth. "Do you remember in second grade, when Rich was still Richie and you were still... and he challenged you to a race for those toy cars you could sit inside and pretend to drive and you beat him and he pushed you into the chain link fence and cut your face open?" Imogen resists touching the scar running from her right earlobe to her chin. "And no one even got to crown Rich the winner because Georgiana Machado took the car when nobody was looking and it wasn't right to fight a girl?"

Sweat pools in the armpits of Imogen's Gap sweater. She wipes her hands on her shorts. "Yeah."

Sophie looks back to the frog and says, "Rich is just a fucked-up individual. Like you or me."

"And you love him."

Another half-smile. "Want a Slurpee, Immy?"

On that June afternoon, Imogen and Sophie become whatever Imogen and Sophie are.

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Imogen was born in the wrong body. She explains it this way in the backseat of the 2002 Toyota Sophie inherited from her mother, with the doors hanging open so the flies can drink from their

sweaty shins: It's like... Imagine, like, um- imagine they talk to you... Imagine they call you one thing or the other, and your heart, like, retracts, and... and you feel like a fish. With that haircut or in those pants, you look in the mirror and everything's wrong. You're a fish and you're paralyzed. You're a paralyzed fish wrapped in wrapping paper and tied up with ribbon. And when you scream, it's in a language no one else can understand. You scream in bubbles. Yeah. It's like that.

Sophie, studying the valley between her knee and Imogen's, keeps trying to grasp the concept, but it swims away. Like a fish. The point of Imogen's shoulder digs into Sophie's temple.

"You don't get it," Imogen says.

"I get it," Sophie says half-heartedly.

Imogen sighs. She rests her head on Sophie's, cracks a knuckle. They sit like that until it's too late.

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"It smells weird in here," Imogen says, muffled by the stag's head.

Sophie lays back, humming at the ceiling. "Weird how?"

Imogen removes the decapitated head from her own. "Like beef jerky was bathed in chemicals. Wanna try?" She holds the stag shell in offering.

Sophie shakes her head. "Nuh-uh."

"Nuh-uh?"

"No way."

Imogen tosses the head to the ground, antlers clattering on the wood. It lands with a dark eye turned towards them. Imogen totters over and lays an inch away from Sophie. She settles her skull in her intertwined hands. When she looks at Sophie, her eyes are dark. Heavy.

"Take your shoes off," she says, "stay a while."

Sophie rolls her lips into her mouth, then, with the utmost care, toes her shoes off. Imogen grins and everything is bright and warm. Sophie tucks herself against Imogen's side, inhales her sweat, closes her eyes to dark armpit hair. Imogen's hand holds her ribs like they're hers.

"Do you think..." Sophie starts, stops.

Imogen traces flowers on Sophie's ribs. "I think, therefore I am."

"Tell me if you hear sirens," she whispers.

Imogen pulls her closer.

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Rich hovers over Sophie, fingers moving slowly over and inside of her. Shadows from the closed blinds line his face. He is not a golden boy or very beautiful. His tan face is somewhat ruddy, his lips are thin, his teeth too large, and he has a dark unibrow Sophie trims for him every other day. Imogen asked why she loved him — or, she'd said Sophie loves him, implying she should not — and Sophie doesn't know. Why does she love him? He talked to her when the other boys didn't, carried her home from parties when she could've walked if she tried, washed her hair when she was too tired, and held her close when they slept. He told her she was cute when her eye swelled up four sizes, kissing the indigo skin to "make it better." The sex is enough, though Sophie can't really say since she'd been too ashamed to touch herself before him and there's no reason to now when he's hers. She likes having him. She likes to be had. Maybe she only loves what he means to her, but is that not the same?

His fingers pause. "I heard something," he says.

Sophie inhales shakily, asks, "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He moves an inch. "Duke saw you driving around town with—"

"With?"

He removes his fingers, making her gasp. "You know."

"I don't—"

"Don't fuck with me, Sophie."

She can't help laughing. "That's a little ironic."

Rich sits back on his heels, hairy knees pressing into the mattress. “What do you gain from spending time with that whore?”

“She’s not a whore,” Sophie spits.

He chuckles, biting his lip. “No, she’s worse.”

Her eyes sting. She is unsure why. “If you have something to say to me, Richard, grow a pair and say it.”

“Are you fucking her?”

Sophie quite likes Imogen and has for as long as she can remember. Her first memory of Imogen is of a soggy, long-haired child talking back to a teacher. What was so pressing to embolden such a little person to such a big gesture she can no longer recall, but she knew then Imogen was right, like she does now. Imogen, with her loud mouth and acute sense of justice. What’s not to like?

She gestures to her naked body, laid bare like a slab of meat under a butcher’s knife. “Do I look like a lesbian?”

He looks her up and down, slow, assessing, then meets her eye with a venomous tilt of his mouth. “I don’t know what you look like.” He crawls on top of her, slides into her. Sophie turns inside out. “I don’t know who you are anymore.”

Something coils in her gut. She wants to reach out, pull on his hair, make him eat his words. Her body is not hers. Her body is nothing like a temple; she is a fish, paralyzed, wrapping paper torn to shreds. She knows better than to say anything more, and soon enough, she can barely remember how to speak. As he moves inside of her, a slow increase of speed, she wonders what love truly is and recalls Imogen, down by the quarry, with the biggest smile known to man on her face, and then she gets there and forgets it all.

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They empty the car of burger wrappers and ketchup packets, tossing armfuls of trash into a bin outside some gas station. Sophie climbs into the driver’s seat, starts the car, checks the mirrors, cross hanging from the rearview. Imogen slips into the passenger seat, knees curled into her

chest. She does not buckle her seatbelt; Sophie has stopped asking her to. The sky is dark, littered with stars. Pulled over, car lights off, Sophie can only see the outlines of Imogen's shape. They have never been out this late together.

"Where should I drop you?" Then, realizing, "Wait, where do you live?"

"My parents live on Pearl and Turner."

Sophie puts the car in drive. Her toes hover over the gas as she checks for oncoming traffic. Nothing. They are alone at the end of the world. She pushes down. "I thought you said you don't live with your parents anymore."

Imogen hesitates, says, "I don't, really."

"Okay," Sophie says. She glances at Imogen, who has turned her face towards the window, showing just her pink buzzcut. "So where should I drop you?"

"Pearl and Turner."

"Immy-"

"I'm telling you where to drop me."

Sophie scoffs, checks her mirrors, and pulls off the road. They roll over the asphalt edge into the grass. She stamps on the break, jostling them both. Flicking on the light, she turns to Imogen, who has somehow turned even further away. If she turns anymore, she'll end up right back where she started. "I'm confused."

Imogen curls tighter around herself. "Are you, now?"

"Where do you sleep at night, Im?"

She turns her head back slightly, revealing a sliver of chin: "Pearl and Turner."

"In the house your parents kicked you out of?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Imogen inhales loudly, screams against the window. Sophie cringes. Imogen turns to face her, grey eyes empty. "I wait until I know neither of them are awake and climb up the side of the house into my bedroom. I wake up before either of them do and climb out. It's easy."

Sophie's eyes flit across her face, from the freckles dusting her cheeks to her thin eyebrows and sharp jawline. Most people laughed when Imogen showed up in junior year with her skull

bared, remarking that the freak finally submitted to her Satanist overlords (which Sophie thought was stupid since the overlord would just be Satan, right?), but Sophie quite liked it. She did not say it at the time, and still does not, but it brought the sharp, gaunt lines of Imogen's face forward. A harsh face for a harsh girl. She glances at the cross, a remnant of the Toyota's previous life. "And they've never caught you?"

She shakes her head. "Never."

"But they've come close."

Imogen looks at her, looks away. Chews on her thumbnail.

"Okay." Sophie sighs, putting the car back into drive. She glances over her shoulder, at all the mirrors, pulls back onto the road. "You're coming home with me. You won't need any keys — the front door is always open and no one's gonna rob *us*, so I'll leave ours open, too."

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Imogen's face, raw and open in a way that almost hurts. She is reminded of herself in Rich's room, him inside her and her mind elsewhere, on another girl's skinned knees and gaunt face, and forces herself not to meet Imogen's eye. Neither of them say anything more. They drive, a bullet cutting through the darkness. And when they get to Sophie's apartment, a one-bedroom too small for her let alone her and her mother and her... Imogen, she hands over clothes her brother left behind and Imogen tries on one of her skirts and they laugh like eleven-year-olds and fall asleep that way too, on top of each other and unafraid of what any of it means.

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This is how it happens: Imogen lingers outside the apartment complex, gripping her bike handles and watching Sophie through the first floor window. Richie is yelling at her inside the yellow box. She tries to explain herself, but her reasoning is obviously not satisfactory. Imogen watches for a very long time. The sun, already casting long shadows when she left the house, sinks below the horizon. It is then, perhaps empowered by this darkness, that he slaps her. It happens quickly, but both Sophie and Imogen will remember it in slow motion.

Imogen, with dirtied knees below her jean shorts and raggedy sweatshirt fraying at her wrists, drops her bike into the grass. The bell chimes, dulls. Only the ants hear. She grabs a baseball bat off the nearby playground. She drags it to the door, metal scraping a path in the grass. Once at the steps, she lifts it, resting what could be lead against her shoulder.

The door never properly closes and so Imogen sneaks in easily. The slight creak cannot be heard over Richie's shouts. Imogen moves down the hall, pantherlike. She tries not to breathe. Sophie's bedroom door is ajar, yellow light emanating from the gap. Through it, Imogen sees Richie's frail back. Without a second thought, she pushes the door open with her shoulder and just as Richie turns his head, she brings the bat down. If it makes a sound, Imogen cannot hear it over the blood rushing in her head. He falls. She lifts the bat again, shaking.

Fingers dig into her forearm. She jumps, ready to swing.

It's only Sophie.

"Im," she says, dark eyes wide. Her pupils are the largest Imogen's ever seen them. In the yellow light, she is golden. "Imogen," she says.

"Soph," Imogen says, just to say it. She does not lower the bat. Richie groans on the floor. They both look to him, then back at each other.

Sophie lets go. It's like someone has pulled Imogen's innards out, gutted her. Sophie reaches for the bat with bronze fingers. Asks, "Can I?"

Imogen does not answer. Sophie's fingers slip through hers, remove the bat, grip the handle. Imogen's hand drops. She watches Sophie hold the bat like a golf club, practice her swing. Test the weapon's mettle.

When Sophie looks up, she is grinning. It is a wild, boisterous grin, and Imogen smiles back, despite herself, despite Richie pushing to his hands, despite their whole lives, despite Sophie not loving her the way she loves Sophie, despite Richie getting to his knees, despite Richie standing shakily, Richie is up, he is up he is-

Imogen means to warn Sophie. The word does come out — her grunt is vaguely "Richie" shaped — but Sophie is already in motion. She is David, Perseus, God's pointing finger. The crack of Richie's skull is loud yet dull. Sophie's smile only widens.

She swings as if born to the craft; again and again.

Richie moans, a dying animal.

He drops. Sophie keeps swinging.

“Take it like a good girl,” she shrieks. “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know WHO YOU ARE! I DON’T KNOW!” Richie’s body squelches. “SO WHAT IF I AM? SO WHAT?” She pauses, bat raised. “You can’t do anything about it.”

Richie is fallen. Blood soaks into the rug. Stray bits of flesh and bone are scattered about. Sophie tosses the bat aside, wipes her nose. Tears run down her cheeks. Imogen wipes them off with the sleeve of her sweater.

“Sorry,” Sophie says. “I don’t know why I’m crying.”

Deserved, Imogen wants to say. “Soph,” because she can, and the word tastes like heaven on her tongue.

“Let’s go somewhere.” Sophie smiles again, this time a little bit sour. She takes Imogen’s hands in hers and Imogen has to force herself to inhale. “Let’s go anywhere. Let’s be big fish. We could be sharks.” The smile is sweeter now, more genuine. “Right, Im?”

Imogen could not tell you fish from fuckfaces. “Okay. You driving?”

Sophie shakes her head. “Take me,” she says.

Hysterical, they run out of the building and down the path. Imogen’s bike lays in the grass, a second corpse.

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Imogen makes a face that Sophie does not recognize, so she asks, “What?” Imogen shakes the face off, and Sophie pinches her, pulls her armpit hair. Imogen squawks and turns away, curls up into a ball. “What?” Sophie repeats through her laughter.

“Nothing,” Imogen says to the floor.

Sophie climbs on top of her, presses her nose to Imogen’s cheek. “Tell me.”

Imogen blinks. Her eyes are lidded. “You’re looking at me funny.”

She digs her fingers into Imogen’s sides. “*You’re* looking at *me* funny.”

“I always look at you like this.”

Sophie feels the oil from her nose spread across Imogen's skin. She leans away, swallows.
"We shouldn't," she breathes.

Imogen is just as quiet. "Why not?"

"Don't you want to go to the city? Be a big fish?"

Imogen sits up, bringing Sophie with her, keeping her between her legs. Sophie puts her temple to Imogen's shoulder, looking towards the hand on her knee rather than the face before her. "Be a big person, yeah."

"So we shouldn't."

Like it's that simple, Imogen's frown says. She runs a hand along Sophie's spine. "You wanna be a small person, Soph?"

"Uh-huh," she says, ignoring the chills running up her hamstrings, "so small I can disappear."

Imogen's hands stop at the small of her back.

"Forgettable. That's what I want to be."

She hears Imogen's head shake. "You can't."

Sophie sits up. "Why not?"

Imogen looks at her. The sky brightens. Sophie looks back. Their noses brush, and if sirens sound, neither of them hear.