

7 years

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Isabel just wants to stay young....

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Chapter 1 - Untitled

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Isabel is seven.

She is not graceful enough to be a girl. She had ballet lessons once, but she grew impatient of moving slowly and wearing matching socks. The only good bit was pretending to be a horse, galloping and cantering across the wooden floor.

She'd like a horse. No - a pony, something small and lazy like her. Or something clever, like a fox. Or a tiger, but not one of those orange ones, a big white one, like the one on the postcard that she has pinned up on her bedroom wall.

Isabel picks the scabs on her knees and doesn't brush her hair every day. She kisses the girls in kiss chase. She watches Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles every day after school without fail. She always has one sock pulled up and the other falling down, and she likes to wear shorts. But Isabel is not tough enough to be a tomboy. She's too skinny, and coke makes her mouth feel funny. Her feet are too small, and she doesn't shout loud enough.

Unfortunately, Isabel is a girl.

Grown-ups say it's easy to go down hill. They say things like 'an uphill struggle' and sigh with relief at the top.

But Isabel thinks it's the other way around.

It's easy to climb the hill - there's trees you can hold onto to pull yourself up, and rocks that you can plant your feet on to stop them slipping. Down hill is a different matter. You have to take tiny steps, and the tree roots only trip you up. And then before you know it you're tumbling and sliding right down to the bottom.

Isabel stands on the top of the hill and looks down. The others are half way across the meadow already, having worked their way down the hill with the tiniest amounts of slips and slides. This is the trickiest hill - it's all dry dirt and twigs, lots to trip over and barely anything to stop you. She read somewhere sticking your tongue out helps you to think, so she does so, frowning at the dirt.

There are fast footsteps behind her, and then the next thing she knows, James has grabbed her hand and they are speeding down the hill together, stumbling and spinning but still ending up in one piece. They don't stop running, because they have to catch up with the others.

He laughs at her, but not unkindly. "What were you waiting for up there?"

Isabel's little legs are running twice as fast as his just to catch up. "Anything."

Isabel. Is-o-bel. You couldn't even turn it into a boy's name if you tried. Bella, bella. Not really - too skinny and scruffy and careless to be beautiful. When Isabel was very young, she imagined that when you became a grown up you had to change your name to something older. She knows better now, but she still wishes it were true. She'd like to become a Katherine, which is a name with heaps of possibilities. Kate, Kitty, Kathy, Katie - you'd never run out of names. Or maybe Amber, like a star or a flower. Or a real tomboy name like Carlotta or Georgia or Roberta.

Isabel can't decide her favourite actual boy's name. There's so many and none of them seem to have any personality (just like real boys. Tomboys are better than real ones any day). So she'll settle on James, for now.

Isabel spends a lot of time outdoors because her father works in a country park. Isabel likes to think that the entirety of the park is her own private domain, a tangled maze of trees and hills and ponds that only she can navigate perfectly. But of course it gets lonely being a queen in an empty kingdom (Isabel regards the visitors and tourists as various kinds of wild beasts that she allows to roam free over her country).

Isabel has a younger sister, Eleanor, but she is too young to do anything but waddle around cheerfully in the visitor centre. So it's lucky, really, that Isabel found Danielle and James and Christine straight away. Danny, James and Chris - just as though they were three brothers rather than only one brother and two sisters.

Christine's practically a real girl, tall and thin without being sticklike, full of smiles instead of wide grins (Isabel has just lost her two front teeth and loves to show everyone the gap). Of course, Christine's *better* than a real girl because she can run down hills and she's not at all afraid of big dogs or mud. James, of course is a boy, so no problems there. And then there's Danielle who is a proper tomboy, complete with freckles and toothy grins and pockets full of bubblegum.

Isabel can't choose her favourite. They all start off as one person JamesDanielleChristine all at once.

The biggest pond in the park used to be a sandpit. Isabel would like to have a sandpit that big, although climbing out might be more difficult than going downhill. The water in the sandpit looks black, but if you scoop it up it becomes clear in your hands.

On her inspection tour around the park, Isabel sits on the bench and stares at the water. The grass here is tall and thick, and will cut your fingers if you give it half a chance, slicing into your skin worse than any paper cut. The water ripples and swirls around as though it's hiding something in its murky depths (The Loch Ness Monster on holiday, a mermaid, a whale).

Isabel likes to imagine floating in the dark water, staining her like ink and swallowing her up. Sadly, Isabel can't swim (so much for being an almost-tomboy), and she can't go near the water anyway, for fear of annoying the fishermen.

At home, Isabel clambers out of the bath and looks down at the water that's suddenly swirling with brown and grey, remnants of Isabel searching for frogs in the compost heap. Perhaps somebody really dirty took a bath in the pond, and left behind traces of their adventures.

Isabel and Danielle are walking across the meadow to the playground. Danielle is here more than either her brother and sister. James has real boys to play with, and Christine -

"Christine's got a boyfriend," Danielle reveals, pulling a packet of bubblegum out of her pocket. Bright yellow paper and silver foil.

"Really?" Isabel cannot work out what turns a boy into a boyfriend. She thinks it's a stage in between boys and men. Boys grow into boyfriends who grow into men, who are always husbands anyway.

"Yes." Danielle rolls her eyes. She holds out a stick of bubblegum, and Isabel takes it without question.

She unwraps it and then sucks the end cautiously. It tastes of yellow - of buttercups and primroses and sunshine. And maybe a little bit of banana.

"You're not supposed to suck it!" Danielle laughs.

"Why not?"

"You're supposed to put it all in your mouth. Like this, look." Danielle opens her mouth. Her bubblegum is floating about on her tongue. "I can't blow bubbles with it yet though."

Isabel remains quiet, contemplating the idea of being able to blow bubbles. Would they be like the kind that you make with washing up liquid? She continues to suck the end of the bubblegum, but when Danielle isn't looking she throws it away into the bushes.

"I've got a blister."

"What's a blister?" A new type of bruise? A graze? Can you pick it like scabs?

"Haven't you had one? They're awful."

"I think they sound quite nice."

Isabel often finds herself alone in the park, and so she reads.

Theoretically, books should be more fun when you read them up trees. Isabel's seen pictures, and read

about reading up trees. But somehow the pictures and the stories don't mention the struggle of getting up a tree in the first place, or how the twigs stick in your back.

So Isabel hops over the fence that bears the 'No Entry' sign and finds a little river that barely reaches her ankles. There's a rock in the middle that's almost like an island, and this time Isabel finds a comfortable way of sitting. The only problem is, all of her books are becoming muddy and mossy after all this exploring.

Isabel reads about adventures and animals and mysteries. Her favourites are the ones where the children seek out mysteries and solve them alone, rather than stumble into them by mistake. Isabel has no hope of stumbling into anything by mistake except for puddles and rabbit holes.

Isabel has waited all of her life to play a computer game and now she finally gets the chance. James is pressing most of the buttons, but every now and then he shouts for her to press something and there is a jingly noise that means she's got it right.

His room is like heaven, full of boys' toys. Isabel would like a megadrive and a football shirt and some trainers that aren't pink, but they are all forbidden because she's a girl. The only toys she owns that are remotely boyish are those that she has stolen out of the lost property box in her dad's office: a plastic gun that doesn't work, a punctured ball, and a football sticker.

James and Christine never come to the park anymore. Christine isn't even here, just Danielle and James, and the big dog that scared her at first. Maybe she'd never come to the park if she had a megadrive.

Christine goes to university. James finds expensive hobbies that take him far away. Danielle goes to big school and more convenient friends. Isabel's little sister grows up just a little bit and is more than happy to traipse around hills and woods and ponds with her.

Isabel scowls at anybody and everybody who dares to trespass on her country. Isabel feels old, ancient, weary. What's the point of being young if you only grow old? What's the point of running up and down hills if you only end up with blisters - horrible painful things that you can't even get any pleasure out of playing with?

She doesn't wander all the way up to the big pond anymore, it's too far. She sits by the smaller one, the one that's nearly all weeds and watches the ducks swim lazily around in circles. This water is dark, but it looks like dirt, not ink. She still would like to float in it, and she's even learned to swim now, but when she sticks her foot in, it doesn't feel smooth and cool like she'd expect. It's cold and full of slime that curls around her toes, and sand that sifts reluctantly under her touch.

Isabel is growing up, and she doesn't like it.

Isabel is thirteen. You can't be a tomboy at big school, because then you're either a dyke or a geek, or both. Isabel is thinking about compiling a dictionary of all these stupid words because she can never quite keep up with what they all mean.

She comes back to the park, because she is reminded that once she longed to go there every day, and because she needs an excuse to get out of going shopping with the girls from school.

Isabel wanders around the park, which seems much smaller now. The pond isn't black because somebody had a bath in it - it's just the reflection of the conifers. She runs her finger along the blades of grass, and it doesn't cut. She wouldn't like to jump in this pond now. She shudders at the idea of how long her hair would take to dry, or how she'd ruin this t-shirt that she spent months persuading her mother to buy.

She heads back to the visitor centre for a nostalgic rummage around the lost property box, and as she's walking through the staff door she runs into somebody else leaving it.

She hasn't seen James in perhaps four years. Back then she used to wonder what the difference between nine and thirteen was, because she certainly couldn't see it, but the difference between thirteen and seventeen seems far more readily apparent.

Being a seventeen year old boy appears to be about having big hands and having the top button of your shirt undone so that your collarbone shows, and having messy hair and a big grin. This isn't what Isabel expected. She takes a deep breath and attempts to shake off this stupid feeling. She feels as though she's just skidded down the biggest hill.

"Hello," he says, looking up from the box in his hands. "Haven't seen you in ages."

"Hello."

"Want to have a look?" he says, holding out the box.

The maggots are pink and orange and slimy, wriggling all over one another in a constant moving mass.

"That's disgusting!" Isabel says, impressed.

James laughs. "I know. Want to touch them?"

"No!" Isabel shudders. She never did quite make it as a tomboy, really. "What are they for?"

"Fishing."

"Oh."

"I was just going, I'm meeting somebody up at the pond."

"Okay then."

He turns away and heads for his bike, which is leaning against a nearby tree, but on the way he drops the box on the steps. The maggots spill over the floor, wriggling desperately. He bends down to pick them up, and Isabel takes a deep breath and touches the nearest one. It's cold, but not really slimy. She picks up some more, and at last the two of them have rescued all of the maggots.

"Thanks," he says, putting the lid back on. "See you later."

Why do people say 'see you later'? They never mean it. They never know when they'll see you again. Isabel watches him ride away, the box of maggots safely in his bag.

She wonders, idly, if James is somebody's boyfriend. But no, that's not what this breathless feeling is about. *This* isn't the same thing as what the girls at school giggle about and Take That sing about, not this stupid breathless jumpy feeling. This couldn't possibly belong to anybody else.

Isabel does see James later, but it's two years later, and he's staring back at her from a newspaper photograph. His grin looks out of place with all the grown-up formal words like 'tragic' and 'accident' and 'life'. She won't read all of the words, it feels too odd, and her eyes keep being drawn back to his face. She doesn't need to know the details.

There's only one way to be young forever, and in a world that could let you go without warning, you can't waste time feeling ancient.