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stargazer

LAURIE PETROU



Praise for *Stargazer*

‘A chilling look at the fine line between love and obsession, longing and desperation, ambition and mania... These women will haunt you’ – **Gin Phillips, bestselling author of *The Well and the Mine***

‘An outstanding book with some of the most beautiful lines I’ve ever read’
– **Samantha M Bailey, bestselling author of *Woman on the Edge***

‘*Stargazer* is a galaxy of a novel: At once a story of friendship, a coming of age, and a dark and utterly captivating tale of family, lust, loss, fame, art and the ever competing hope and destructiveness of youth’ – **Amy Stuart, bestselling author of *Still Mine***

‘A sinuous, captivating exploration of the mysterious depths of female friendship that had me hooked from its first pages... This unforgettable novel from a truly talented novelist is perfect for fans of Celeste Ng’ –
Marissa Stapley, bestselling author of *The Last Resort*

‘A slow-burn literary thriller in the best possible way: eerie, beautiful, and impossible to put down. I loved it’ – **Robyn Harding, bestselling author of *The Perfect Family***

Praise for *Sister of Mine*

‘Beautifully written, tense and real’ – **Ann Cleeves, writer of the Vera Stanhope novels**

‘A solid psychological study of the relationship between siblings [...] the tension arises as much from the careful peeling away of the two girls’ characters as it does from the mystery itself’ – ***Daily Mail***

‘Steeped in intrigue and suspense, *Sister of Mine* is a powerhouse debut; a sharp, disquieting thriller written in stunning, elegant prose with a devastating twist’ – ***NB Magazine***

‘Imaginative, beautifully observed characterisation. Masterfully written and enchanting, with more than a hint of menace’ – **Caro Ramsay**

‘Riveting debut’ – ***Publisher’s Weekly***

‘Gripping, twisty, and singular. A not to be missed, well-worth-it read. Here’s hoping for more from this imaginative, insightful author’ – ***New York Journal of Books***

‘An unputdownable page-turner’ – ***USA Today***

‘One of the best novels I’ve read this year. A brilliantly conceived narrative with wonderful characters and great depth’ – ***Globe and Mail***

‘A twisty, claustrophobic nail-biter’ – ***Entertainment Weekly***

stargazer

LAURIE PETROU

VERVE BOOKS

For Kristen

PART I

ROCKY BARRENS UNIVERSITY, 1995. FRESHMAN week: a welcome rave organized by upper-year art students in the middle of the night, in the middle of the woods. The swell of bodies moved like one thing, their feet pounding on the wooden floor of the Art Den. Techno and electronic music pulsed, lights sparkling like confetti that wouldn't land, swirling around them, on them, in them. Girls tossed manes of hair, sweat slicking long strands to foreheads, glow sticks shining brightly, green and red and pink trails. The beat speeding up, the DJ bouncing frantically, ecstatically, the crowd jumping, eyes closed, reaching a fever, a fever, *a fever*, and then, so fast they couldn't keep up, their hearts pumping wildly, it turned, it changed, it kept going. It *was* wild, and they were, too. The heat, the dance, the energy, the place. Oh, that place. Eventually, she would catch them all, freeze them into permanence as background characters. They're famous now. And they came from here. How could anyone forget?

But, for now, Diana stood with her back to the wall, a small sketchbook and pencil in hand. She was trying for some respite from the heat, cigarette in her mouth, eyes blinking against the pulsing lights. Around the room, against the walls, dozens of people, slumped together, stoned, making out, holding one another in ecstasy, in Ecstasy, a feeling and a drug, a mood of tenderness and wonder and innocence, rising with the temperature. She watched the crowd, the shapes of bodies, the expressions on faces, the feeling, fabric clinging to skin. The clothes, of course, she knew and recognized: so many Marianne Taylor designs on the dancefloor. *The Rave Queen*. Diana didn't go for rave or techno wear, even Marianne's, in spite of her adoration of the woman who featured so largely in her life, the woman who had stood in this very room as a student herself all those years ago. Diana opted instead for a boxy shirt dress. She knew it was flattering, that straight things hung nicely on long bodies, long legs. She had learned how to dress for her extreme height. She had taught herself how to stand, how to act, how to be. To make the most of who she was.

More, even. She never slouched. She always held her chin up. She didn't fidget. She molded what one journalist later described as *an exacting personality*. She taught herself to be decisive, noting that a firm *yes* or *no*

when asked for her opinion made her appear expert, purposeful, unwavering, and that this commitment to a side, even if she didn't really mean it or know she felt it the moment before she said it, cloaked any self-doubt she had and evoked perceptible admiration in people almost immediately. Their eyes would widen slightly, pupils dilating a fraction in concentration, belief. Sometimes, she followed a determined assertion up with a reason. *No, you should do this instead. Yes, and don't add anything.* People liked to be told what to do, to trust someone who was sure. And, more than anything, after years of hesitation, Diana was sure.

Even now, with the drugs taking her mind on a trip, pulling her away, she held a part of herself close and firm and grounded. She bent her right leg up, her foot finding the wall, resting her wrist on her knee. She looked into the packed room, searching, and found her: her girl. Aurelle, speaking closely with another girl, smiling widely, animatedly, her characteristic red lipstick mostly faded except at the edges. And like magic, their bond manifested: she looked over, across everyone, and saw Diana. She raised her arm and waved happily; Diana lifted her own hand in response, then bent her head and began a small sketch of the scene. Aurelle, her head tipped back in laughter.

Eventually, the early dawn brought a weak light through the open doors and windows, and Diana collected Aurelle and they left the rave, walking out of the Den and into the woods like they were disembarking a spacecraft. Music followed them and it was hard to tell if it was an echo or if it was in their minds, their fading high. They talked about this a bit, marveling at the way their ears rang against the silence of the morning. The conversation bounced around as their bodies hummed while coming down, while their fatigue and slowly dawning sobriety made their tongues thick and their heads tender. Diana wrapped her fingers around Aurelle's small hand and squeezed. A surge of joy seemed to bubble up inside each of them, encapsulate them, and they shared it, reveled in it like they were standing inside of something special, protected from the world. Best friends. Like sisters. They looked at one another and grinned. What could be better than this, than being here together? Diana breathed deeply, taking in the smell of the pines, and laughed. Aurelle did, too, knowing how Diana felt, that trust and love they had for each other, the comfort of relaxing into the other's presence like a kind of melting, like a liquid filling up the same space.

‘I met this really cool girl. She’s from New York. Her dad collects old pinball machines,’ Aurelle said dreamily, swinging their hands between them.

‘I loved the remix of that old Carly Simon song,’ Diana said, remembering how the DJ had cut into the opening; ‘Nobody Does It Better’ with a fast, pounding beat.

‘I’m really thirsty,’ Aurelle said suddenly, her eyes wide.

‘Here. I saved a water bottle for you.’

‘Oh, God, thank you!’ She took the bottle, tipping the water greedily down her throat, wiping her mouth gratefully. ‘Thank you! Oh, look! How pretty.’

They had reached the lake, and the sun was coming up on the other side. A loon skittered across the surface of the water; Diana smiled and pointed to it even though Aurelle was already looking. They gazed, marveling at their luck, being here, now.

They went to work getting the canoe from its usual spot tucked away in the trees, laughing as it bobbed about and rocked while they got in. Aurelle scraped her shin on the side, as she often did, and swore, hitting the canoe in frustration. They heard other students around by the large campus dock and, looking through the trees, the girls saw that they were all jumping into the cold water in their sweaty clothes, hollering like children. Diana thought of the PJ Harvey song with the whispered line about little fish and wondered if it had been part of the music set that now was scattered like debris in her mind as the drugs wore off, tiny beats, or if it had arrived unbidden because of what she saw.

As they launched the canoe out of the trees on the shore, they waved to the ravers, now clamoring out of the cold lake, screaming and laughing, running back towards their cabins, to their warm rooms, to their beds, where they would sleep off the night into the day. Do it all over again.

TORONTO, 1990. DIANA WAS THIRTEEN and sitting in a sturdy, wooden chair by a small, octagonal window in her top-floor bedroom of her family's Toronto home, looking out. Her arm had healed enough that her doctor had removed the cast the day before. When he did, sawing through the plaster mold that had accompanied her throughout the summer, she was struck by the sight and smell of her arm: shriveled and pale, damp and weak, reeking of something close to decay. She stared at it, and the doctor had chuckled, not unkindly, suggesting that it would take some getting used to, but that with enough sunshine and play, it'd be good as new. She'd cradled it in her other arm as she got up to leave the hospital room with her mother, and the doctor had said, 'Try not to do that, Diana.' She looked at him, questioning. 'Don't coddle it. It's stronger than it looks.'

She thought of that now and looked down at her arm, white and clammy like some deep-sea creature, resting in her lap. She flexed it, straightening it. *Sunshine and play*. She returned to her familiar viewpoint out the window. She had kept the chair in this position, at this angle, all summer. Turned just so, so she could see more. Looking out, looking in.

She had taken to drawing what she saw from her window and, after all of these weeks in her cast, banished from summer activities, from the lake and sports, her antique wooden desk was scattered with pencil studies. She glanced at them, feeling a thin pride at how her skill had improved over the weeks. She was nothing if not disciplined, and was pleased by results that came from practicing a thing. On her lap now was her sketchbook; in her right hand, her pencil; but she hadn't drawn anything today. She tilted her head, the better to see the scene next door.

The Taylors' house seemed to be made almost entirely of glass. From her perch in her room, Diana could see all of the goings-on. She could watch someone walk from the kitchen to the dining room, see them reappear on the stairs, and then in an upper-floor bedroom. Her vantage point gave her full access to one side of the house, like a page from a Richard Scary storybook, a cross-section of a life shared. The notion of this, being part of something together, this version of family, was foreign and fascinating to Diana, whose family members seemed to exist on solitary planes, remote

from one another. She watched now as Mrs Taylor, *the* Marianne Taylor, the famous fashion designer, called to one of her sons to help her reach something in a cupboard in the kitchen. Diana, so tall herself, thought of how she would like to do this small thing for her, retrieve something out of reach. Be useful and appreciated. Needed. Such a small act of kindness and teamwork. The eldest Taylor son, who responded to her call, easily grasped a box from the cupboard and lowered it for his mother. Diana could see that it featured a photo of some kitchen gadget on the front. Mrs Taylor smoothed her son's hair and patted his cheek. He allowed this, then left the room. Diana's gaze didn't follow him but continued to watch Marianne as she opened the box in the kitchen. It was a mandoline, that dangerously sharp tool that looked and sounded like an instrument, for cutting food into paper-thin slices. Marianne ran her index finger slowly beside the blade, a motion so private in that interior space that Diana blinked, strangely moved. Something else caught her eye. A shadow, a movement in the Taylor yard.

Diana's own brother, Keith.

He said it had been an accident, her arm breaking. It had happened at their holiday home, the summer cottage up north in Muskoka, one weekend in early June. All the Tony Toronto types had large cottages around the lake and, come June, Muskoka was overflowing with city wealth, gliding around on water skis. The Martins had been all together, as a family. Diana's mother was inside the cottage, reading a book, their father on the balcony, at the barbeque. Keith was horsing around with the kids from a neighbouring cottage: Jodi and her brother, Mike, who had come to see if Keith and Diana wanted to hang out. They were taking turns racing down the hill from the cottage, across the dock to the water and jumping in the lake – a forested, rocky terrain that required dodging and weaving and speed. Mike held his father's old track and field stopwatch, the yellowed cord hanging down from his hands. They were trying to best each other, see who was fastest from the time they started running to the time they hit the water.

Diana watched from some distance away. She too was strong and fast, and it looked like fun, but she had never participated in things like this. Because of Keith. Her entire life, he had bullied her, told her she sucked, that she was useless and slow and stupid. Her brother's dismissal was as constant as air, as real as life itself. When she was younger, it had confused her. Their parents had always favoured Keith – their only son, their firstborn – and so

it confounded her that he so relentlessly kept her down. She used to try to make him proud, assuming he was just hard to impress. But every achievement of hers was read as something that should have been his, something she stole. It was greed, paired with bloodlust. She had seen him enjoy causing fear and intimidation in younger kids at school, laugh loudly and cruelly at suffering. He was someone for whom the top, the best, was rightfully his, a position to be protected by any means necessary. And so Diana had learned to never threaten his birthright to happiness and satisfaction, to never risk drawing his attention. She pursued different sports, activities she knew bored him. It made little difference. Keith didn't hate Diana, although she could see how someone might think that – other kids had remarked that he did. She wished he'd hated her; that would mean he considered her at all. He didn't hate her; he loved his life. She was merely the closest threat, the nearest target. He worked in a broad, boorish style of bullying: name-calling, belittling, mocking. Her appearance, her height, her lack of friends. If she excelled physically, it was because she was a freak; if she did well academically, it was because she had no life. And so, mostly, Diana avoided his world, denying herself so many things.

But that day in June, when the kids were running down the hill, the sun flickering in the leaves, she wanted to be a part of it. She chose to take the risk, to be a kid in the summer at the lake and nothing more.

'I want to try!' She shouted, her hands cupped around her mouth, surprised by her own voice, usually deep and quiet, now shrill and girlish.

'Yeah! Come on, Diana!' cheered Jodi and Mike.

Keith turned to look at her. 'Oh, this I gotta see,' he sneered.

Keith was fifteen, almost sixteen, and his body was large and muscular. He was at that age, so close to childhood but appearing like a man. His mouth turned up in a cruel smile. He had won the race every time, and had no intention of losing. But Diana felt reckless, competitive, like she could best him and feel good about it, and maybe there wouldn't be consequences at all. The lake, the cottage, the trick of the summer light made it all appear like family fun and it emboldened her. She grinned and jogged easily up the hill.

'Yes, Diana,' said Jodi. 'You can take him down.'

'Yeah, smoke him,' laughed Mike. Neither thought this mattered at all, not really. They had moved into their cottage only the summer before, and

having only seen Diana and Keith together occasionally, thought his jibes were just playful sibling teasing. They didn't notice the way he was watching her as she considered her route down to the lake, making note of the tree stumps and branches that might slow her down. He began to walk down the hill himself, close to the dock.

'I'll watch from down here,' he called up to them. Diana smiled at Jodi and Mike. Mike clicked the small silver button at the top of the stopwatch to reset it.

'Ready?' he asked.

Diana leaned into a sprinter's stance. She squinted, her eyes on the dock.

'Go!' Mike pressed the stopwatch and Diana took off running, dirt and sticks flying out from under her as she careened down the hill towards the dock. She heard herself laughing and gasping, thrilled with the physicality, the action of it. Keith was leaning against a tree, watching. She neared him, closer, closer still, and, in the last moment, flicked her eyes at him and away from her path. His body moved slightly, angling, his own eyes narrowing. In that second, she doubted herself, lost her way, tripped on something – *did he trip her?* – and went flying, her body arching and smashing onto the dock with a sickening *crack*. She skidded across it and to a halt, her face close to the rocks that jutted out on either side of it, her left arm screaming in pain.

Later, Diana heard her mother ask Keith if he saw what happened.

'She tripped. She's so clumsy, I don't know why she wanted to keep up with us in the first place. She shouldn't have even tried.'

She never knew for certain why she'd fallen, but felt, instinctually, that to try and best Keith might cost her something greater than her arm one day. She spent the rest of the summer watching from the sidelines, both at home and at the cottage, her left arm in a large plaster cast. She devoted her time to drawing.

The Taylors, their Toronto neighbours, had always been a source of fascination for her. Marianne was so glamorous and talented; her only daughter, Aurelle, seemed like a girl out of a movie, she was so beautiful. Their life was like a moving magazine spread. Diana's summer bore witness to theirs from her top-floor window. She had never been a recipient of the gestures of love and affection that came so easily to all the members of that family. The Martins never laughed like the Taylors did together. It

was unaffected and appealing. Earnest. Aurelle was the inverse of Diana: she had an ease about her, an openness and natural charm, and her relationship with her mother was loving and affectionate. Diana's fascination and obsession with their happiness often made her weep, sitting alone in her room, but she couldn't stop watching. The mother-daughter relationship, the family she saw from her octagonal window brought her the warm, impossible comfort of a snow globe. She took the crumbs of their love and they sustained her; she made them permanent in her sketchbook so she could feel it again and again, drawing little scenes of their lives together. Her own family was remote at best, cruel at worst. Their large original brownstone lacked large windows and featured so much wood that Diana felt she lived trapped in an old, enormous tree. Her parents were formal and distant, from another age. Keith relentlessly bullied and belittled and her parents turned their heads. All the while, Diana's pain deepened and hardened.

She saw him now: Keith, in the Taylors' yard, sloping across their deck with all the familiarity of one who has never been shut out. He was friends with one of the Taylor boys, Matt, and they were laughing, leaning against an outside wall, lighting a cigarette and sharing it between them. Looking back at the kitchen, at Marianne, who was slicing potatoes with her mandoline, Diana felt a sharp fury at Keith for ruining this moment, like a frat boy walking through a Mary Pratt painting. Her body tensed as soft rage flooded her veins and she felt a pleasurable pain in her healing arm.

She got up quickly and left the room, her chair tipping slightly. Back, forth, then righting itself.

DAYS AFTER THE RAVE: THE first day of school at Rocky Barrens. Diana took a long drag from her cigarette and exhaled, closing her eyes. In that tiny moment, she felt it: deep contentment. Happiness. If it was a thing, she'd have described it as a clean, cool linen, a sheet pulled tight. She opened her eyes and looked. The lake, through the window where she stood, was calm, sparkling, and she knew it would be a crisp autumn temperature if she were to reach her hand in off the dock as she had so many times. Today, when they took the canoe across to campus for their first day of classes, they'd have to dress warmly, the air coming off the lake would be revitalizing and fresh. The maples were dazzling oranges and yellows, blazing between the pines. It was the best time of year. She looked behind her at Aurelle, deeply engrossed in a novel on the couch, twisting a strand of hair around a finger. She noted her girl-like innocence, her comfort here. Diana loved her friend's passion for stories, her ability to immerse herself so completely, to escape entirely. Diana's fingers itched for her pencil, for the chance to draw her just as she was then. She glanced out the window again, at the familiar landscape she'd known her whole life, but that had never felt like it was hers. It had always been Keith's, forever his domain. But now, finally, she had a purchase on the thing, could grasp this place and give it new meaning: her life with Aurelle, a home together, a future. A chance to recreate herself. Something she had often dreamed of.

'Do you want to take the car, or should we canoe across?' she asked Aurelle, who now looked up, startled, returning to the present. Her eyes flicked out the window.

'It looks chilly,' Aurelle said doubtfully.

Diana smiled, and joined her on the couch. She reached for Aurelle's hands and rubbed them between her own.

'We'll bundle up. It will be fun.' She looked at the delicate watch on her own wrist. 'We should get going, though. First day. Grab your stuff,' she said in her cool clipped voice, standing up. She headed for the door, grabbing her satchel and light trench coat on her way. 'I'll meet you down there, OK? It's a gorgeous day!'

Aurelle smiled then, too, Diana's declarations contagious as always. It was

gorgeous. And it was theirs to make of it what they wanted. She gathered her cigarettes and a binder from the table and put them into her school bag. She had her first class in an hour. She took a last look around the cottage and felt light, free. She shrugged on her shearling jean jacket and followed Diana outside.

Diana was down at the dock untying the canoe. She stood up and waited, eternally patient, her imposing figure cast against the water like a painting. Like the Alex Colville ones Diana had shown her once. Shielding her eyes, Aurelle looked across the lake and could just make out the large RBU sign and groups of students on the shore. Voices reaching across the water. She tossed her bag in the canoe and, grasping Diana's warm hand to steady herself, climbed in, taking up her own paddle. She sat up front in the bow; she didn't like the water really, wasn't as strong at paddling as Diana, who seemed borne of the water itself. She felt Diana's stroke behind her as the canoe shot easily forward, past the rocks that jutted out precariously close to the end of the dock, moving them with purpose directly across the lake towards the campus shore. Diana let out a cheerful 'Ah!' into the fresh air and Aurelle laughed, saying, 'OK, OK, you're right, this is pretty nice.'

It was early September, their first month as students at RBU, but to Aurelle, who leaned her head back into the morning sun, it was as though they'd always been here. Home, her life, the suffocation of fame, the universe that revolved around the Taylor family – it wasn't here. It was behind her. This place was their own now, her family was Diana. It was just as Diana had said it would be when they moved in a few weeks prior. They adjusted immediately to the wild, forested campus and the way of life here. Like it'd been waiting for them. They could reinvent themselves.

My Diana, she called her, as if there could ever be another. Diana had rescued her, revived her, brought her back to life by giving her a new one. The possibility of something not predetermined for her. Diana made her feel safe, protected; just seeing her filled Aurelle up like a warm elixir. All this time her kindred spirit had literally been the girl next door. Aurelle's only regret was that they hadn't known each other until just over a year ago, but they made up for it now in spades. She had followed her friend, Diana, who had stridden away from her own family, her hand wrapped around Aurelle's, and trusted that at Rocky Barrens, they could start fresh.

Young people were everywhere here. They roved – hungover, high, drunk, no matter the time of day or night – between the trees to get to one cabin-like building or another. Music rode on breezes, from windows, from boomboxes propped up on wooden stairs, songs mingling and canceling each other out. Its nickname was ‘Camp RBU’ and it truly did feel like summer camp at times. Students sat at the lake, gathered on the dock or at the little coffee shop up on the rocks, watching the rowing team skate across the lake, shouting in unison.

Diana and Aurelle were a part of all of it, but apart also. They’d decided early that they would live together in Diana’s family summer cottage, which was no rustic getaway, but a massive mansion in the woods across the lake from RBU. It was their home now: watching across the water, paddling back and forth in various states of sobriety, in their two-person canoe, their two-person club. They eschewed Mr Noodles and all-day pajamas, opting for a grown-up life. They made dinners together, drank wine, took advantage of their wealth and upbringing. Coats hung in the closet; shoes at the door.

‘Here, I’ve got my boots on, I’ll pull you in,’ Diana said, gingerly getting out of the canoe and easily hauling it into her favourite docking spot among some pines a distance away from the large dock. She offered Aurelle her hand and helped her out and up the bank. She reached into her pocket and shook a cigarette from a pack, offering one to Aurelle, cupping a hand around hers, then lighting her own, and they began their walk through the woods towards the main outcrop of cabins where classes were held. They passed a couple of students who blatantly stared at them, Diana nodding curtly, Aurelle ducking her head shyly.

They reached a fork in the path with a sign towards different campus buildings. Aurelle turned to Diana and said, ‘I’d better head this way. I’ve got class in a bit.’ She gestured towards the crop of cabins to her left where the Humanities courses were taught. Diana leaned down and briskly kissed her cheek, her breath smoky and warm. She smoothed Aurelle’s hair and gave her hand a final squeeze. *I could put you in my pocket*, Diana sometimes said to her. *Because you are so tiny, and I could keep you with me always.*

‘OK, good luck. I’m going to the Den for my first studio class. Find me

later? Or I'll find you.' Aurelle smiled and nodded, and Diana turned, walking purposefully, her long strides taking her away into the trees. Aurelle felt the happy warmth of her presence long after she'd disappeared from view.

As Diana approached the Art Den, she was reminded of her first time seeing it. An almost perfect day.

Before Aurelle had become part of her life, before all of this. She was at the cottage for the weekend, enduring her brother's painful presence in her favourite place. While Keith and his friends all slept off their hangovers, Diana had slipped out onto the water in the kayak. It settled her. She couldn't let him get to her, define her. *Control*. She took deep breaths. This lake was her sanctuary; it was worth the trouble of Keith and his friends to have these peaceful moments in the water, alone. She paddled away from the cottage, towards that famous college that had always been on her radar, Rocky Barrens University.

Classes were out, and it was quiet. She docked the canoe and walked around the RBU boathouse, which was locked, and read the signs for students about signing out water sports equipment, hours, safety. It looked like it had been there since the college's early days, back in the 60s when it had first opened. She felt a pang, wishing she could be a student there, thinking it could never be. She loved that the school had a history, a backstory: that when it had originally opened, it hadn't had the infrastructure to deal with the relentless northern winters, so had closed indefinitely and just reopened recently. Many of the hallmarks of the college's heyday in the 60s remained in the lettering of signs and the murals and mosaics on the sides of the cottage-like buildings. And, despite its decades-long hiatus, RBU had a very strong academic and sports reputation as a small, elite school for artists and athletes. The rowing team at RBU was already quickly racking up awards in tournaments – and so, of course, it was determined by her family that this was where Keith would attend.

He will thrive there, she'd heard her father saying to a friend. *I bet he becomes the captain of the rowing team in his first year*. Keith, too, had spoken of the place as though it was already his, acted like the resident expert on the college. Her parents never thought of her as RBU material, though. *Diana is more Ivy League, obviously, either here or in the US*. Diana didn't want that, but her family didn't take the time to know her. She

was already a gifted artist and her research into the faculty at RBU excited her. She knew that it was she, not Keith, who would fit at RBU, but gave up on the hope of it. She mourned it as though she'd already lost: she could never attend the same school as him. He would dominate the place, ruin the unspoiled landscape for her, turning her fantasy school into a house built from empty beer cans.

She had strolled through the campus, looking in windows, smiling at the people who remained. Some faculty and staff along with a few students were there for the summer so it wasn't vacant, but had a peacefulness to it. She didn't feel like an outsider, like she shouldn't be there. It was an easy campus to navigate. There were wooden, arrow-shaped signs nailed to trees and signposts for buildings with names like *Dark Adaption Observatory*, *Literae Humaniores*, and *The Art Den*. The buildings themselves were log cabins – large, small, one or two storey – with well-trod steps and railings, bulletin boards in front of each one advertising some event or another related to that particular field of study. She learned that there were stargazing evenings up at Rocky Barrens proper, which she knew was some distance from the campus itself; a literal barren landscape where people gathered to look at the sky. She learned about parties at the Art Den, about a group that hiked every morning (*Newcomers welcome! No experience necessary!*), about Polar Bear Dips and Spaghetti Dinner Fundraisers for the Swim Team. She saw postings for sublets on paper with carefully cut tabs and handwritten phone numbers scrawled sideways. A few torn off. She wondered if the people who took them lived there now. Made lunches in a little kitchen. Showered in a small but neat bathroom. Majored in English Lit. Or Women's Studies. Classical Studies. Art.

She had paddled back towards the family cottage that morning, the sun higher. There were horse flies buzzing loudly around her and a mist coming off the lake as the day warmed up. She saw a loon dive then reappear further along. She looked at the cottage as it came into view and felt a warmth for it, a generosity. She smiled. Her life could be different, maybe.

And then, suddenly, it was.

Later, she said that it had been such a nice morning. A perfect morning. She didn't say it had been perfect because she'd been alone, away from Keith and his friends; that being far from family always made her less lonely. She left that part out. She told a version. She learned there are

always versions.

She was here now, a different person in a different time. With Aurelle at Rocky Barrens – her fantasy life made possible. Having grown up going to the cottage in Keith’s shadow, under the thumb of his cruelty, she now had no reservations about being herself, taking up space. *Up north*. The entire place was surrounded by height. The pines reached up, straight and scraggy, the maples grew everywhere they found room, ferociously persistent.

She pushed the door of the Art Den open and breathed deeply, the smell of oil paint calming every painful memory and welcoming her. She held her chin in the prideful way she knew people hated and envied, and entered. It was Day One.

TORONTO, 1994. BEFORE DIANA, BEFORE RBU. Before any and all of it. Aurelle was a teenager trying to become someone. Or, at least, to separate from someone else. Aurelle loved her mother, of course she did. Marianne Taylor was kind and affectionate, and seemed to be universally adored and admired. She was the famous fashion designer of couture lines of apparel, was the feature of fashion shows, the choice of celebrities and stylists. But she was also, somehow, miraculously, a loving mother, a devoted wife – an object of envy and desire. Sun-kissed, talented, blessed with a large family, she had it all and shared it. Aurelle loved that, she did, but there were times she envied everyone with regular parents.

The Taylors lived in Rosedale, an affluent area of Toronto. People who used words like *affluent* lived there. Their house, a large brownstone, had been gutted and radically renovated to feature enormous windows, open-plan rooms. It was one of the oldest homes in the neighbourhood, and regularly photographed by curious onlookers and paparazzi hoping to get shots of the famous Marianne Taylor family in their natural habitat. Since Aurelle was a baby, there had been photographers documenting her life and that of her brothers, both in the house and whenever they left. The sound of clicking cameras became a beating heart. Even now, there are photos published of the house in its heyday, its period of youth and glamour. In some of them, you can see Aurelle, looking off to the side, trying to get away. People zoom in on her face, analyze it for some evidence of what would come later, some clue. Zooming in until she is just a muddled blur of pixels, a smudge of paint, not a girl at all.

Aurelle was often asked about her life, but these questions always contained the expected answer. *Isn't it so fun at your house? Don't you just love living there?* Or even the frank statement, *You are so lucky.* People asked her what her mother was like, but they had their own ideas. Aurelle tried to see her life through others' eyes. Marianne was perfect, of course; she was glamorous and generous, her smile a row of gleaming stars that shone out onto all of them, and Aurelle and her family were brighter under her sun. And. But. Aurelle smiled without showing her teeth. She craved quiet corners of the house and yard where no one was laughing or playing

music, where no one was at all. And then, in those quiet spaces, she immediately felt her solitude so keenly that it hurt. It was the conundrum of her life at home. She wondered what was wrong with her. She felt guilty for wanting something else.

Now in her twelfth grade, with only this and one more year left of high school, Aurelle was trying to be more or less, but, at the very least, different. One afternoon at her locker, she overheard some kids talking about going to a rave. It was easy for Aurelle to join conversations, to be part of a group. She simply held the gaze of one of the girls, smiled, said something like, *Where are you guys going tonight?* And they always opened their circle. Easy. She was likable. *Really nice.* Being nice was a currency in which Aurelle knew how to trade. Nice was smiling at strangers all day so that no one would say she was a snob and a bitch or that she thought she was better than everyone. Nice was answering questions about her famous mother from anyone who asked, even if they were shouted to her in a crowd at the cafeteria. Nice was a gentle laugh, a self-conscious touching of her hair, a looking down of her eyes. Sometimes her cheeks hurt at the end of the day from being nice for so long. The thing she read most about herself in articles about her family were quotes from schoolmates: *She's actually really nice.*

‘We’re going to a rave. Do you...’ – an exchanged look – ‘Do you wanna come?’

They weren’t her friends, not really. Aurelle didn’t actually have any close friends, although anyone at the school would have claimed the opposite. Friends: girls her mother insisted she invite over, or who came to the house with her brothers; girls who flocked round and helped her mom in the kitchen, who had sleepovers and did face masks in her bathroom. They were fun and funny and shrieked about gossip and cried about breakups. Aurelle never felt close to any of them. But they were easygoing and they had invited her, and Aurelle wanted to do and be something different, anonymous, away from her normal. A rave was perfect. *Yes.*

The plan was to meet at Rosedale subway station at midnight. Aurelle waited until her family was asleep, the moonlight pouring through her bedroom windows, and pulled on a pair of jeans that were fitted at the hips and flared wide, had little rainbows on the pockets. She wasn’t much into techno and rave culture, but had a few items she could make work. Going

through her shirts, however, she found nothing she wanted to wear and began to feel panicky about being late, missing her chance to meet up with the others. She padded lightly down the stairs to her mother's studio, hoping to find something she could wear there. Later, she heard her mother tell this story in interviews, Aurelle's own life reinterpreted, embellishing details here and there to make it more exciting. It was something she became used to over time. But here, now: quietly turning the knob, she crept into the room and switched on a small table lamp. On one of Marianne's work tables was a T-shirt spread out beside some notes. Marianne had been trying to crack into a younger market, and this was clearly one of the lines she was toying with. The shirt was cropped, white, and had a large, stylized cherry on the front in bright red. The piece was unfinished, the boxy bottom unhemmed and roughly cut, but Aurelle pulled it over her head and looked down at herself, admiring how the shirt showed off her midriff, fit snugly over her breasts. She clicked off the lamp, left the room, left the house, making her way out into the night and, unknowingly, into pop culture memory. She didn't see someone watching her from an upstairs window next door; she moved into the darkness, away from her house with a perceived, treasured anonymity.

It was like a dream. A subway ride in the darkness, moving with a crowd of partiers into a large building on Richmond Street, the music filling her body with a pulse that felt elemental, instinctual. The other kids had shared some Ecstasy with Aurelle when they met at the subway station, and soon she was just one more kid in a mob of young people dancing, her mouth in a permanent grin that was real and true. Aurelle had only ever tried pot before, and the thrill of experimenting with other drugs was a kind of high in itself. The loosening of the Ecstasy, the way it extended and enriched everything from feelings to touch to colours, was like walking through a doorway into another world – a part of her felt she'd happily spend the rest of her life this way. Here, dancing with her arms over her head, feeling the sensual pleasure of strangers' hands on her bare waist, on her mouth, in her hair, she was both seen – deeply, truly seen – and unseen. Free. It was a dazzling hyperreality and she knew she wanted more.

Lying in bed the next day, knowing this was possible, that she could disappear and escape fame and family, that there was a life outside the Taylor household, was the most delicious secret. But two days later she was

brought back down, rooted once more to her mother. A photo of Aurelle, dancing, eyes closed, arms stretched over her head, the cherry T-shirt clearly shown, hugging her body, was the large, feature photo of the style section in the paper. Her name, but more importantly, her mother's name, captioned below. Aurelle cringed at the image, at her private moment of abandon made public. Her face burned. Initially fearful she'd get in trouble, Aurelle was surprised when the opposite happened: orders for the same print, and others from whatever line it came from, started piling up immediately, the phone ringing constantly. Marianne kissed the top of her daughter's head, lips pressing down hard in excitement. 'Oh, you terrible, rebellious, genius girl!' she laughed. 'You are the best accidental, guerilla ad campaign ever!'

Aurelle stared again at the photo of herself, caught in a moment of joyful freedom, unaware at the time that anyone was watching, taking a photo they would later sell. She forced a smile up at her mother. 'Glad I could help.'

'Help? Oh, honey, you have single-handedly opened up a whole new market.'

The MT line of rave wear, ignited by Aurelle, exploded. She became known as 'the girl in the cherry tee,' a sexualized calling card that embarrassed her but thrilled her mother. Since then, she often asked Aurelle to wear the clothes, to school, to parties, anywhere: *They suit you so well, darling!* She encouraged Aurelle to go to more raves, giving her money and grilling her the next morning about what people wore. Aurelle did go, becoming a familiar face on the Toronto rave scene and a key part of the MT brand, neither of which she'd really wanted. It wasn't the same. It was no longer her own. Everything was her mother's. Her parents had framed the unfinished shirt with the cherry on it. It hung, under glass, in the front hall of their home. The home where anything could happen. Where your very self could be on display. She was so lucky to even have the option of rejecting this gift. Others would kill for it.

The Taylor house: a sunny, well-lit dream home. It was full of strange little rooms, nooks and crannies, many floors and different stairways to get to them. All over were reminders of Marianne's enterprise, like another member of the family. Along with the framed MT T-shirt and corresponding photo of Aurelle, portraits from photo shoots for *Vogue*, *In Style*, the *New*

York Times all hung throughout the house. Tributes to Marianne Taylor, one of the most famous clothing brands in the world, who had recently moved into urban rave wear. *Rave Queen*. She could do anything. There was a large handbag called 'The Aurelle' that many of Aurelle's high school classmates owned; she couldn't tell if it was intended ironically or not. Her mother had named handbags and tote bags and wallets and sneakers after all of her children, capitalizing on the public interest in her family. Aurelle was the youngest of four, and the only daughter, all the children close in age. Mike, James, Matt and Aurelle. Mike and James were away at college now, but home fairly often, which was always a cause for celebration, for a party.

Aurelle drifted through the house, a lonely figurehead. She preferred to be a room away, listening as the action took place from a distance. Her family largely left her alone unless there was a photographer or interviewer inside: then she was summoned, cajoled, complimented, and then she needed to turn it on, to smile and offer sound bites about her mother, the clothes, the famous shirt.

'I mean,' Marianne laughed recently, seated beside Aurelle at dinner. 'I can hardly be the face of the company anymore. I'm the aging queen.' She rolled her eyes in self-deprecation. 'We need *you*,' she said, holding Aurelle's face in her strong hand and squeezing her cheeks. 'Your flawless skin – my God! Did I ever look like this? – the hair, the eyes! You are so lucky, my darling, to have these looks drop in your lap!' She shook Aurelle's face gently. 'My little poster girl.'

Photographers were at the ready for the ongoing action of the famous family. *Click! Flash!* A Taylor returning home, opening the front door, out in the wild at a restaurant, hugging a friend, looking disheveled, looking glamorous: frozen in celluloid, then sold, bought, scrutinized. *That's the daughter! The one in the cherry tee.*

'The face that sold a thousand shirts,' her mother quipped, winking.

The Taylor children and their friends spent hours and days at the house, playing video games, having parties, floating around the pool, sleeping over and making food in the large kitchen. In the winter, they lounged in gigantic, soft sofas and chairs, watched movies and had elaborate themed dinners for fun. No one seemed to struggle. Money isn't everything, perhaps, but it smooths and eases things; like butter, it greases the joints, it dulls noise and gives everything a glossy shine. The Taylors had become

like surrogate parents to many of their children's friends over the years, earning them the nicknames 'Ma and Pa Taylor.' A *Vanity Fair* story was published with artful photos of 'Casa Taylor,' its roving visitors and inhabitants posing, draped over furniture and holding MT handbags like supermodel orphans.

Marianne befriended and mothered all the teens as though they were her own. She was tall and waifishly beautiful, eternally young in spite of her jokes about her age, affectionate to all, the center of this particular universe. It was important to her that she was a friend to them, that they felt part of the family. Anyone in the house was automatically invited for meals and Marianne fixated on them during dinners, encouraging them to open up to her, to tell her about their lives. Aurelle watched this, suspecting, in her guiltiest heart, that her mother was learning about teenaged lives as research. When her children's friends wore her designs, Marianne fawned over them, and they preened in the glow of her affections. She was the object of desire of more than one teenage boy who frequented the house, the confidante of many a heartbroken young woman, often staying up nights drinking scotch with one or another teenager who would eventually tell her they wished they could talk to their mother like this. Media stories about Marianne usually took the angle of a question: *How did she juggle it all? How did she manage her job and family with such graceful aplomb?*

Their father, Mitch, was tall, athletic, masculine and secure in his role as CFO of his wife's company, for which he regularly traveled. All of the sporty athleticism of Aurelle's siblings came from her father, who played tennis and golf, his sun-bleached blonde hair blending into grey, his skin golden. When he dove into the pool, he had the grace and form of a man much younger, emerging to the cheers and applause of all of the young people in the yard.

Sometimes, sitting by the pool, Aurelle felt someone watching her. And once, shielding her eyes and looking up to the window of the house next door, she did see someone there. But when she lifted her hand to wave, the curtain fell across, and there was no one.

5

AURELLE HAD SEX FOR THE first time after crawling on her hands and knees through a tiny door that connected her bedroom to her old playroom. She was at the end of her seventeenth year, and she still didn't know who she was. She was timid and bold, she was honest and pretty. She was so many things, and so many of them were tied to this house and the family in it. That she could do this under their nose was a tiny subversion, a small thrill. The white broadloom in the playroom was lush and untouched, and, afterwards, Aurelle and Tim lay sprawled out on it, their bodies imprinting into it like snow angels, their chests heaving. She felt so many things and wondered if he did, too. Worldly, guilty, elated, infatuated, sad, relieved, drained, shy. More, too, like that she kind of wanted him to leave now, and that her skin felt clammy. She wondered if that sound was her parents coming home, or one of her brothers hitting a tennis ball outside. What she should do with this room, and if she would keep the tiny door. If she could clean the carpet, and how.

'I should probably go,' Tim said, and she nodded, suddenly wanting him to stay. 'Are you OK?' he asked.

'Yeah, of course. You're sweet.' She kissed him on his closest shoulder. 'Are you alright?'

'Yeah. That was amazing.' He grinned sheepishly.

She smiled. She sat up and moved to put her clothes on, slightly hunched over since the ceiling was slanted. She'd thrown her shirt over the roof of her old dollhouse, and retrieved it now. She faced the wall when she put it on.

Later that day when she thought about it, the same feelings plagued her but they were further apart, not all jumbled together. She still felt happy in a sad way, secretive and pleased, but they were elongated emotions, stretched out somehow. She didn't know why she felt anything other than good, which was there sometimes, too. She loved Tim, had done for the past two months during which time they had pawed at each other with increasing, near-hysterical longing, her body feeling like it was on fire. Of course, the more she tried to unpack the whole event, the more it served to just turn her on again, and soon she wanted him over and over again, and now she could

see what all the fuss was about. She lay in her bed, burning with desire, and got there herself.

Tim was one of the regulars at the Taylors' long before he and Aurelle got together. He was a senior and friends with her brother, Matt. They were on the rowing team at Glenn Algar College, the private boys' high school where all the Taylor sons attended while Aurelle went to St John's Academy, the equivalent girls' private school. The boys on the team seemed to have become tall and fit overnight, and the kids Aurelle had hung out with, eating popcorn in front of the TV and playing board games, were now near-men.

This included guys like Keith Martin, who had lived next door since forever and had been like another brother to her since she was a child. It seemed he had always been part of their home, his presence a given whenever there was fun to be had, turning up Christmas mornings in his pajamas after his own presents had been opened, walking in the door like their house was an extension of his own, kicking off his sneakers in the front hall where they lay like old dogs. This, in spite of the fact that the rest of his family seemed to keep to themselves. He had a sister in Aurelle's grade but they didn't even say hello to each other, not really. She had always been shy, but Keith made her sound like a freak. He mocked her mercilessly when he was there, and often called over the fence to her, teasing her in a way that everyone knew was cruel but laughed along with anyway. He called her *Ichabod*, *Freakshow*, *Sasquatch*. He said they could 'feast their eyes on her for five dollars a pop.' He called her strange, and so, she was. Mr and Mrs Martin were old money, that much Aurelle knew from the neighbourhood chatter, but that was about the extent of her knowledge. She put little stock in that sort of thing, but there was an awareness she couldn't shake that came with her upbringing. Now, Keith was on the team with Matt and Tim, along with a number of others who hung around in a clump. His loud, jeering laugh echoing throughout the house, blending in with the gang of athletes who frequented it.

But Tim stood out among them all to Aurelle. A longtime friend of Matt's, he was now tall and muscular with coarse, curly hair and blue eyes. He was popular with the girls – both Aurelle's friends and the older girls that hung around the Taylors' place. He'd been coming to their house for years, but she noticed him now. His features had settled, he'd grown, his voice had

deepened into something intoxicating; Aurelle had known him her whole life but suddenly, urgently, he was changed and so was she.

‘Hey.’

He’d nudged shoulders with her when she was in the kitchen getting snacks one day in March, before anything happened. The rest of the kids were shrieking at the TV in the basement and the noise came up the stairs. Aurelle smiled, surprised to see him, her hand in a newly opened bag of chips. He laughed and she blushed.

‘What’re you doing, Little Tay?’ His nickname for her. ‘Stealing some chips before you share them?’

Aurelle recovered and forced a smirk. ‘That’s right. You want in?’

She offered the bag; he held her gaze and popped a chip in his mouth. It was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen. She swallowed. They went downstairs together, and he sat on the large couch. Aurelle sat on the floor beside his right leg, and it was all she remembered of that night. His right leg, moving ever so slightly to touch her left arm, and that movement alone was like pure sex to Aurelle. It was like magic.

After that night, Tim seemed to find her alone all over the house even when it was teeming with other teenagers. In the garage, in the yard, in the laundry room. He’d flirt, touch her casually, the friend of an older brother, but it meant more, it was loaded, and she burned with his touch. He teased her about the boys her age who frequented the house, asking her if she liked this one, what about this one. *No, no*, she’d say. *Not him. Never!* A slap to the arm, a laugh. A shove, a look. *What do you like*, he’d ask. *Who’s your type, then?* And someone would walk in, burst the bubble of the moment, and he’d hop off the dryer or grab a soda from the fridge and she would be alone, her heart pounding. *Hey, Ma Taylor*, she’d hear him call to her mother and she’d stand perfectly still, listening to every word exchanged. Absorbing each detail about him, categorizing it in her mind. Where he wanted to go to college, how his parents were, what his siblings were doing, all of it, everything, everything.

And then one day she’d had a shower upstairs after school, and she was wearing her old terrycloth robe, and she was rubbing her hair with a towel, and when she opened the door, Tim was standing there. She stopped.

‘Hey, Aurelle,’ he said, calling her by name for the first time. ‘Cleaning up after a big day on the farm?’ He smiled lopsidedly and looked down at his

fingers. 'I'm just,' he took a step closer and Aurelle backed into the bathroom again, her bum against the counter. 'I'm just here early. Matt's not home yet but we're meeting here.' He licked his lips and took another step.

'Oh,' Aurelle said quietly, her hair dripping down her neck. And then Tim reached out a finger and pushed a piece of wet hair off her face, and Aurelle stopped breathing altogether.

'Matt would kill me,' he murmured.

She bit her lip. 'What do you mean?'

And he kissed her, pressing his body against hers, moving his hands through her wet hair.

Somewhere, a door slammed, and Tim pulled away, taking a deep breath and letting out a quiet laugh. 'Shit,' he said, looking away. 'Um, I'll talk to you later, OK?'

Later became whenever and wherever they could find each other. They were a drug, they were addicted, both pulling back, gasping, red-faced, with each encounter. No one had caught them; no one knew they were together at all. They went to different schools, were in different grades. He'd be going to college soon. The house was large enough that they were able to sneak away. They had a system when all the kids were together. One would leave, and the other would find an excuse a few seconds after; they staggered their entrances and exits in this way, becoming bolder and bolder until that day in May when Aurelle ran up two staircases, Tim's hand grabbing for her ass the whole time, and into her room, where he closed the door and reached up, down, in, further, further, *yes, yes, you're so wet, you're so hard, don't stop, are you sure, yes*, and she pointed at the small door that led to her childhood playroom, and they almost didn't make it through the door because she was on her hands and knees crawling and he wanted her like that, right there, but they made it through and then and then and then. *And then.*

Aurelle loved him. She loved the air because he breathed it, she was overwhelmingly stupefied as though drugged in his presence. He had a power and a magic that on some level she suspected was dangerous, but easily ignored this. He told her over and over how sexy she was, how much he wanted her. One day, up against the slanted walls of the crawlspace in the basement, she breathed into his neck that she loved him. He responded

passionately, wordlessly. That he never told her he loved her out loud felt like a small detail; she told herself that actions spoke more than words, that they had a connection that went beyond conventional expressions of love. He told her they couldn't tell anyone, that her brother would go ballistic, that it would be weird for them. Aurelle was quite sure her brother wouldn't really care, that he would just tease her, as was his way, but she abided by Tim's wishes. Anything he wanted. She couldn't imagine a world in which she didn't feel his hands on her, his kisses. The fact that it was secret was all the more special to her. Something of her own that didn't come from her family, someone who saw her as separate. This was hers alone.

6

THE ART DEN, KNOWN JUST as ‘the Den’ among the students, was one of the largest buildings on the Rocky Barrens University campus. The sprawling space divided into studios, both closed-door and open-concept, with windows across most walls, allowing for natural light to filter in. This was not only home to the Fine Arts students, who had 24-hour access to the space, but the location of the parties and raves that took place at RBU throughout the year. There was an unspoken understanding with the art students, a trust bestowed upon them by the administration, that permitted creation and frivolity at all hours. The high quality of the work coming out of the Fine Arts program was already gaining a reputation for the school, and there was a shared awareness that this space, in all of its permutations, was necessary for great work.

The Fine Arts cohort was small. Twenty people were accepted to the program each year. Diana looked around the space: a smattering of folding chairs; an area at the front of the room where faculty were sitting, holding coffee mugs. Students stood awkwardly in clumps. The work of former and current artists hung on the walls. Easels pushed to the perimeter of the room. Music played from somewhere. Diana watched them all carefully, taking note. Long-haired Bohemians, girls in second-hand cords and Nirvana T-shirts, guys with nose-rings and blue hair, conservatively dressed small-town kids, ravers, goths, grunge, punk, indie, Brit-pop, Ska – there was a bit of everything. She knew they would underestimate her. They would form groups and make friends quickly. They would be relieved to find common interests in music and books, and they would suffer through midterms together and stay up late and have campfires and confide about love and breakups. She saw all of this and she was outside of it, but unbothered. She chose a chair away from anyone else, and folded her long body into a sitting position, her legs stretched out to the side and crossed at the ankle.

A small woman with cropped, messy dark hair, a youthful face and a Blondie T-shirt moved to the front of the assembled group, smiling. The chatter died down, and those who weren’t yet sitting found seats.

‘Good morning,’ she said, her voice strong and confident in the large

studio space. ‘And welcome to the Art Den.’ There were murmurs and shy smiles. Diana waited, unmoving. ‘I am Grace McLaughlin, Professor of Painting and Chair of the Fine Arts program here at RBU. You may call me Grace. We may not be now, but one day, with the right tutelage, I hope we will become peers.’ She then introduced her fellow faculty members, mostly older men, and one petite Parisian woman who taught drawing. ‘Together, we will challenge you to make art that is meaningful, difficult, and of excellent quality.’

She regarded the students, then continued.

‘Sometimes you will fail. You may be told that your work is derivative, that it is sentimental, that it lacks skill. If you are to succeed here, this will not bring you down. You will push on to make your work better, stronger, different from the rest. Your backgrounds – be it wealth, or good breeding, or connections – will not make a difference here. Talent will be the great equalizer. You will spend long hours here. These studios are available to you 24 hours a day. We recognize the value in giving young artists free rein to experiment, not only with your work, but with your imaginations, your social circles, your lives.’ She paused. ‘I myself am a graduate of the Rocky Barrens University Fine Arts program, from many moons ago. It was important then, and continues to be vital, for young artists to disrupt the status quo. Push yourselves. Make mistakes. Threaten order.’ Grace’s eyes grew wider, and rested on Diana, who held her breath. She nodded, almost imperceptibly. *Yes.*

Grace waited, letting her statements sink in.

‘Your art should demand things of the viewer, even if it is simply the appreciation of technical skill. Do not underestimate the value of learning how to render fabric, water, skin, hair or wood. Beyond artistry, be constantly asking yourself about concept, meaning, heart. Take license,’ she said, her voice unwavering. ‘By force, if necessary.’

Grace McLaughlin smiled now and, with that, the students were hers. Diana, too. She was seduced by the liberty and by the challenge. An artistic call to arms.

Finally, Grace said, quietly, ‘This is your time to be wild.’

The rest of the morning was devoted to drawing, led by the small French professor named Isabel. The students chose easels from the stack against

the walls and formed a circle around a large area with a stool, where a middle-aged woman soon entered in a robe. Each easel had a pad of newsprint adhered to it. Diana had purchased all the supplies suggested in the list the school had posted out back in June: oil paints and bolts of canvas and stretchers, pencils and charcoal and oil sticks. She'd brought her own materials from Toronto, too. There was also an art supply shop that ran out of a closet-sized room between the studios, its front a cut-out window with a half-door below. It was operated by upper-year students, wearing long-suffering looks of boredom as they executed transactions with the enthusiastic first years. Diana had seen a line of people waiting to make purchases in the break before the class began, and had chosen her own easel early, setting it up and waiting, watching.

The woman in the center, the model, took her robe off unceremoniously. She rested her foot on a part of the stool, her arms at her sides, and turned her head slightly. She was around fifty years old, with a slender and muscular body. Her hair was greasy and fell in stringy pieces down her back. Diana took this all in; some students around her also looked, some pretended not to, many having never drawn a nude before.

'We are going to do an exercise,' Isabel announced loudly to the room, which fell silent, listening. 'These are four-second drawings.' She paced, her posture like a ballerina's, chin held high. 'You need to demonstrate form, muscle and where the model is putting her weight, using only the line and weight of your charcoal. You should only have one or two lines in each drawing to render this. The model will change her pose, and you will have a moment to flip to the next fresh page.' She paused, her eyes roving around the room at her new students. 'Choose your charcoal now.'

There was a shuffle of movement, and the model suddenly came to life, curling her torso inward, her hair falling over her face.

'Begin,' Isabel called.

The other students were talented, Diana could see right away. The girl beside her, Kim, had a confident approach to drawing, a lack of hesitation that cost others time – like the guy on Diana's other side, Noah, who tried to draw too much, too lightly. This aligned with Diana's first impressions of them. Kim was bold and outgoing, and had thrust her hand at Diana as soon as she'd dragged her easel over. Noah nervously copied what other students were doing as they had set up their stations. Now, they all kept tabs on one

another, despite the fast pace of the exercise; eyes darted between easels, students sizing each other up. Diana knew all of this, acutely aware of the held breath, of the sharp taste of competition that moved like a live thing among them.

‘Change!’ Isabel called out every four seconds, and the model changed her pose. There was a frantic rustle as pages were turned or torn from their pads, floating down like enormous white leaves while the students’ stark and simple renderings became simpler still – stronger, better. Lines drawn with such pressure that pads held indents of the model’s throat, her back, her buttocks, her breasts. One line. Two Lines. ‘Change!’

Diana was smiling. This was her arena, her gladiatorial debut. She became aware when Isabel stood behind her for a spell, Kim and Noah’s bodies shifting slightly, a tension in their movements. Isabel simply murmured a ‘very good,’ and continued to move around the room.

During a break between classes, Diana stayed close to her easel station, observing the other students as they chatted, starting friendships that they would later say were the most important of their lives. Kim established herself as a kind of leader immediately, her voice and laugh carrying, others watching her and nodding in agreement as she spoke. Diana felt no need to connect with any of them, choosing instead to study the quick drawings she’d done in the session, assessing them for weaknesses and strengths.

‘So, do you live on campus?’ Noah asked after the break, as they were setting up for a painting session with Grace.

‘No, I’m across the lake at my family’s cottage with a friend.’

‘Oh yeah? That’s cool.’ He paused. ‘I’m at Segwun residence. I’ve only been there a week and the hallway already smells like stale beer.’ He shrugged, pulling out some paints. ‘And... sometimes puke.’

Diana smiled lightly. ‘Yes, we’ve been to a couple of parties there.’

And so they had. Diana and Aurelle had soaked up everything about the nightlife of the campus since they’d arrived a few weeks prior. They’d sought out keggers and raves in the residence, nights in the Art Den, as well as bush parties and house parties. Together, they roved the campus after dark and wandered into whichever place was most appealing to them in the bubbling undercurrent of debauchery. As the summer ended, more students arrived, and by the time Frosh Week hit, the nightlife in the woods was in full swing.

‘I thought I’d seen you around. You look familiar,’ Noah said. He squinted, and pointed at paintbrush at her. ‘Isn’t your mother famous, or something?’

Diana regarded him coolly. ‘No. She’s not.’ She turned pointedly away from him, and adjusted her focus to her the center of the room, where Grace had entered.

‘Okaaay,’ Noah muttered, and blew out his cheeks. Diana didn’t care. He was talking about Marianne, about Aurelle, and she would give him nothing. But a tiny part of her thrilled at the thought of being mistaken for Marianne Taylor’s daughter. As she watched Grace speaking with Isabel, Diana thought about how far she’d come from those days of watching the Taylors from her bedroom window.

Better than family.

AURELLE SPENT HER MORNING IN Twentieth Century American Literature. It was a fairly large class in one of the bigger buildings on campus. The lecture hall was traditional: slanted downward slightly towards the stage, where there was a podium for the professor. The desks were wooden and old-fashioned, and Aurelle thrilled at the feeling, the smells – like she was in *Dead Poets Society* – as she tucked herself into a desk near the back of the hall. The students were all surreptitiously looking at one another, checking each other out, chatting amiably with those around them. Aurelle pulled the first book they'd be discussing out of her bag and examined it. *The Sun Also Rises*. She'd read it as soon as she'd bought it, charmed by the title and by the notion of reading Hemingway while preparing for going off to college. She enjoyed the economy of his writing, the plainness of it unlike so many other authors she'd read, and she looked forward to talking about books with other people who loved to read as much as she did. She felt happy, normal.

Just then she felt the familiar sensation of being watched. Looking around her, she saw two girls talking quietly and looking her way. She smiled shyly at them, and they looked sheepish, moving away to sit elsewhere. Soon the room was almost full. The person who sat beside her ignored her completely, and that was fine by her.

Evening. After her first day of studio classes, Diana decided to stay late, working on a painting study they'd started in their last session. She was alone in the studio when Grace emerged through a small door nearby.

'Ah, burning the midnight oil already?' she asked, approaching Diana's station.

Diana nodded. 'I wanted to keep working. It's nice to have this space available.'

'Yes,' Grace agreed, looking around them at the large open room. 'Some other Fine Arts programs employ lockers for students to put away their work so that many people can use the studios. We made our program small so as to nurture a particular culture. A means to stretch out and live with each other's pieces, styles. It allows students to get to know one another by

their work; it fuels a hunger, a healthy competition.'

She winked and nodded at Diana's canvas. 'You're clearly skilled.'

It was a simple still life, one based on objects that Grace had set up for the painting class earlier that day, yet Diana's attention to light and darkness made her own study stand out among the others on easels around the room.

'You will find that other students will take notice of this quickly.'

Diana studied her professor's face, saying nothing. She was a tiny woman, impish. Freckle-faced. Diana could imagine what she'd looked like as a girl. Outside, a chorus of students calling out to each other made its way through the windows. Grace smiled at Diana, and turned to leave. She paused, looking back.

'People think that artists are open-hearted,' she said, her face stony. 'But when we are at our best, we are quite competitive.'

The sound of her shoes echoed in the space as she disappeared through a doorway connecting the studios.

It was a warm evening and Diana felt a lightness as she left the Den, the sense of the evening opening up. She would find Aurelle, see how her first day had gone. It didn't worry her that she didn't know exactly where Aurelle was; they always managed to locate each other. Students wandered in pairs and groups, but Diana was happy in her own company. There was a phone booth at one of the intersecting paths between buildings. It was charmingly built to fit in, its walls made of wood with no door. It looked more like an outhouse than a phone booth. Diana watched as a girl put a coin into the phone and stood, the phone against her ear, waiting.

She heard music playing nearby and headed through the forest of trees towards it. The Fugees' 'Killing Me Softly.' She hummed along quietly as she walked up the path of a house party at a modest cabin. There was a circle of students smoking outside and Diana walked over. They nodded at her and opened the circle, and a joint was passed her way. *What program are you in, what year, where do you live, where are you from?* She turned her head, bored by the conversation, casually looking for Aurelle. And then, again, as always, there she was, speaking to a tall, older-looking boy, his fingers fiddling with the ends of her long, blonde hair, her face looking up into his.

'Hey, stranger,' Diana said, taking strides over to the porch where they

stood. Aurelle's face was flushed and beautiful, her lips parting in surprise. She looked delighted to see Diana. She reached up and hugged her fiercely, like a child. Diana looked over Aurelle's shoulder at the guy as they embraced, and nodded in greeting.

'Hey,' he said. 'I'm Dave.'

'Of course you are,' Diana said, letting go of Aurelle. She retrieved a cigarette from a pack in her pocket and put it in her mouth, then flicked her lighter. 'So what's your story, Dave?'

'I'm, uh, not sure. What's your story?'

'I'm on the first draft. Not sure how it ends yet,' she deadpanned, lighting her cigarette and inhaling. Aurelle moved in close, and Diana slipped her arm around her shoulder and stared expectantly at Dave. He looked from one to the other.

'Do you guys like to party?' he asked.

Aurelle raised her eyebrows and looked up at Diana happily, as though asking permission. Diana laughed.

'What d'ya got?'

Two hours later, Aurelle sat on the dock, her legs crossed, the water moving restlessly beneath her. She lay back, hair falling through the dock boards, the slats hard but not uncomfortable. Her mind wandered over thoughts, bumping and tripping and taking flight. Mushrooms, weed, beer. It was all fairly new to her, but she found she enjoyed it. Taking leave of her life, of control. Having an excuse for being silent, for just watching and feeling nothing but the tremors of her own breath. She looked up at the sky, taking in its beauty. She loved being outside in the woods and happily closed her eyes against the breeze.

She had made out with Dave a bit. He had a strong, hard body. Had Diana also? She remembered seeing his hands on her. Diana biting his ear. He had told them, she thought, that they were sexy. He asked them to kiss each other, and Diana had told him maybe another time. They left. When was that? An hour ago? A minute? She didn't remember coming to the dock. She had floated here.

I don't even have to make any effort and things will be fine. I am part of the forest, the trees.

She wasn't sure if she'd said that out loud or not. Not sure where the

thought came from. The water lapped against the dock.

Diana?

Was she alone now? Couldn't remember. A loon called.

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what I do.

She thought of the feeling of pushing her thumb into clay or mud, an imprint. *I don't know if that would work, if I would make an imprint, if I am even here. Diana is. She is in the world, making a claim on it. A print on it. Diana.*

'Did you say something?' Diana's voice. In the water. Aurelle sat up with effort and looked into the dark water. She saw Diana's head bobbing towards her.

'Are you swimming?' she asked.

Diana laughed in her deep, husky voice. Aurelle did, too, and it sounded funny in the wilderness, echoing off the water. There were people deeper in the woods, the campus, and their voices drifted pleasantly through the trees. She wondered if they knew how funny it was over here.

'Come in!' Diana called to her.

'I'm not wearing my bathing suit,' Aurelle said, laughing harder.

'Neither am I, Dummy!'

Aurelle stood up, stumbling a little. *Oops.* She slipped off her sneakers and pulled off her socks. Then the rest of her clothes. Down to her bra and underwear. She shivered.

'It's cold,' she said, and Diana told her it was warmer in the water. She was doing the backstroke between the floating dock some way off and the dock where Aurelle stood. Her white skin glinting in the moonlight.

OK.

OK, here I go.

She felt her feet leave the dock as she jumped in. There was a moment when she was in the air and, suddenly, painfully full of regret. Then the water hit her hard, a shock, taking her breath away, bringing her to the present. She went under, then up, gasping. She heard Diana cheering. It was so dark. She was aware of trying to breathe.

Where are you?

'Where are you?' She said aloud, her voice small. 'Diana?' She felt scared. Moved her hands all around her, forgetting what she knew about swimming. It was black, all black in front of her.

‘I’m here, don’t worry,’ came Diana’s voice, deep and soothing, moving closer.

Aurette started to weep, her body betraying her. ‘I’m not good at this,’ she said in a whisper, her arms making small splashes. She had never been good at swimming. She had taken lessons; they all had. They had a pool, for God’s sake. Her brother was a rower. But she didn’t love being in the water. It was too vast and unpredictable. Her parents had drilled into them that it was powerful and, rather than overcoming that, she shrunk in the face of it. She went under again, her feet useless. Up again. Her heart frantically pounding. She swallowed lake water. Idiot. *Diana*. Crying. Crying hard now. *It’s not funny anymore. It’s not funny.*

‘I’ve got you,’ the voice in her ear said. Diana had her strong arms around her now. ‘It’s OK, babe, I’ve got you, come on.’ Dragging her, coughing and crying, towards the shore, where suddenly she felt pebbles under her feet. ‘We’re OK, come on, it’s alright. I have you.’

They stood, arm in arm, and staggered to the beach. Aurette shivered uncontrollably. She watched Diana run over to the dock and get their clothes.

‘Brrr!’ Diana yelled, trying to keep things light. Aurette smiled a little.

It’s OK, she told herself. I am here. I can tell that I am real because I can hurt. I can drown. I can die. I’m alive. Diana was pulling her own large sweatshirt over Aurette’s head.

‘Here you go, Tiny.’

‘I like that. Tiny,’ she said quietly.

‘That’s what you are,’ said Diana, rubbing Aurette’s legs, briskly drying them, pulling her jeans on for her. They kept sticking to her wet legs. ‘God, jeans are the worst.’

‘I love you, Diana,’ Aurette said, touching her friend’s head.

‘I love you too, Tiny.’ Diana said, smiling at her. ‘But let’s not do that again, OK? I’d better keep an eye on you, so I can keep you safe.’

‘Yes, clearly!’ They laughed. Aurette lay down in the dirt.

A few minutes passed. She heard Diana dragging something along the ground close to her. Then: ‘Come on. Let’s go home.’ She looked up and saw that Diana had untied the canoe and brought it over. ‘I’ll row us across.’

Teeth chattering, Aurette wrapped the long sleeves of Diana’s sweatshirt

around herself while Diana effortlessly propelled them through the water to their home.

‘Look, you left the lights on,’ Diana said, nodding her chin across the lake. Aurelle looked, and smiled.

‘It’s so pretty. I’m so glad we came here. This is the best place.’

That night, they slept in the same bed, their bodies entwined for warmth, for love, for friendship, for lust. It wasn’t momentous, it wasn’t surprising. It was gradual. It was relief. It was just where they found themselves.

Most mornings, Diana woke before Aurelle. She would sometimes lie there beside her friend, silently smoking, and think of the very home that Aurelle had been so keen to leave. She allowed her mind to drift there so that she could feel the familiar, sweet sawtooth of envy, the keen rush of ambition it unlocked, the thrill of moving forward. What were they doing there now? Did Marianne think of them? Did she think of Diana? Diana, whose life had been so fully transformed by what happened with Keith on that one, perfectly terrible day. Imagining the Taylors, that family, that house in her mind’s eye, she rarely cast it next door to her own family home, to the Martins. She compartmentalized, as was her way, and barely registered the enormous tree in the front yard that shared the shade of its leaves with both families. She felt a throb of pleasure at her new, choreographed fate and the knowledge that this version of her life was so infinitely better than what might have been. And, looking down at her sleeping friend, the innocent and beautiful face, she’d carefully reach for the sketchbook at her bedside and begin another drawing of Aurelle. Another, another. So many drawings. The sound of pencil scratching into paper the only noise, bringing the girl up, forward, to life. Her cheeks; her hair; her arm, cast out in slumbering surrender.

JUST WHEN AURELLE WAS HOPING to tell people about her and Tim, Keith Martin died.

It happened during a freak diving accident at the Martins' cottage up north, at the start of the summer of 1994. *He knew better*, is all anyone could say, in hushed voices. The neighbourhood buzzed with gossip, thinly veiled as concern. *He must have misjudged the distance. He hit something. His poor parents. His poor sister. How can they ever enjoy the cottage again? What will become of it? And then, invariably: It's a magnificent summer home; have you ever seen it? Massive, custom-build. Looks like it's part of the rock and forest. So unique. And the interiors are gorgeous. It was featured in Toronto Life, did you know? I wonder if they'll sell it. It's got to be worth a fortune.*

Tim had been there when it happened, with a bunch of the same friends who were regulars at the Taylors' Toronto home. He hadn't seen it. None of them had. They had all still been sleeping up in the cottage. Apparently, only his sister had been there, down at the dock, when he died. Aurelle overheard all of this from someone else; not Tim. Her own brother, Matt, hadn't been there; he was at home that weekend, on a date with a girl he'd been seeing a lot of lately. After Keith's death, Aurelle noticed that Matt spent almost all of his time with the girl, Tammy, as though he could replace grief with love, trading one intense feeling for another.

Suddenly, their house, the fun house, *Casa Taylor*, shrunk in the shadow of the grief next door. They closed the front door more quietly; there was a lot of shushing on the back patio, even though the lots were very large and the houses far apart. It felt like any whimsy, any happiness, had to be limited to the indoors in case it wafted over the fence and caused any further pain to the impenetrable grief of the Martins.

Despite the extremely private nature of the family, the funeral was enormous. Students from both Glenn Algar and St John's, as well as their families, packed the church. Aurelle looked at all the people there, shaking their heads and frowning sadly, but then, slowly, bored, whispering, looking at their watches or flipping through hymnbooks. They weren't bad people or anything, but there is only so long someone can stand quietly, even for

death or God.

The boys on the rowing team had rallied together and spent all their time with one another in the days preceding the funeral, mainly at one boy's house who, Aurelle suspected, had a quieter home. They were pall-bearers, and when, finally, they carried Keith out of the church, they looked to Aurelle like tired children: their eyes red from crying, their shoulders shaking. Keith's parents sobbed in the front row while his sister, Diana, stood stoically erect, her hand resting lightly on her mother's back. Aurelle noticed how strong she looked. She remembered then that Diana was also an athlete. Aurelle didn't pay much attention to sports at St John's, but even she had noticed that the Martin girl had become something of a star in the past year or so. Keith had brushed off any achievement while he was alive, saying that she surely had lots of time for training since she was a friendless loser. 'She'll probably win the Olympics of virginity,' he'd said once. Aurelle knew that Keith was cruel, but his absence was notable and his funeral felt like the end of something.

Aurelle watched Tim carrying the coffin and wanted to be sad for him – and she was, she insisted to herself. She was sad. But she was also late. In spite of the bowl of condoms her mother kept in the powder room for the teens – another mark of how cool she was – there had been one or two slip-ups, moments really, when she thought on it, moments so frantically fast that it seemed implausible that they could lead her here. She picked at her lips nervously. Her fingers moved to her stomach while everyone watched the procession; she jerked them back when her mother leaned in, squeezed her shoulders and whispered, 'Are you OK, sweetie?'

In the car on the way home, Marianne looked over at Aurelle in the passenger's seat. 'Do you ever see Diana? Keith's sister? I've never seen her with your gang.' The rest of the family had ridden with their dad, but Marianne had wanted to pick up some food for the Martins and Aurelle had offered to come with her.

'No, I don't know her,' she said now, watching a couple standing at the crosswalk, waiting for the light to change. 'Well, I mean, not really. We have a couple of classes together.'

Her mother nodded thoughtfully. 'She and her parents don't really seem to socialize much, do they?'

'I guess not.'

‘Maybe you should reach out to her,’ her mother said, looking at her before moving through the intersection.

Aurette rolled her eyes. ‘Mom, I’m sure she has her own friends.’

Her mother *tsked* under her breath and muttered, ‘Whatever you say.’

She didn’t tell Tim she was late. Initially, when she still believed it was a far-off idea, she had thought that the stress of it would bind them even closer. There was, admittedly, something thrilling about it, mostly because she was certain her period was just around the corner. It even felt like it. Many of her friends had had ‘pregnancy scares,’ and the brush with real life was a charge. She loved Tim furiously and deeply. She had taken to sleeping with one of his T-shirts: she lay it over a pillow and put her arm on it, fantasizing that they were living an adult life somewhere and were able to sleep the night together. But Tim’s shock over Keith’s death had consumed him and he had withdrawn from Aurette, spending time mostly with the team, and elsewhere. They had never met outside her house, and so she felt condemned to stay there in case he returned.

But then something shifted inside her, and Aurette realized that it might be real. She had been feeling tired and nauseous, and, while it took her a week or so to connect the dots, it occurred to her that this might be a real pregnancy, that this might be morning sickness plaguing her during the day. She knew so little about actual pregnancy – that mythical villain, something that could not actually happen, not really. She had only spoken to Tim on the phone, late in the night, the cord wrapped many times around her wrist. Their conversations were clipped, both of them preoccupied with other things. Tim was quiet, his mind somewhere else entirely – away from her, away from this life. Aurette felt like she was treading water, her head just above the surface. In the midst of the shock and grief around Keith’s death, all of the seniors were receiving their acceptances to universities, and Tim was no different. He’d been accepted at Queen’s and Western and his life had a forward trajectory that Aurette was beginning to see may not include her, just as surely as his smell was fading from the T-shirt on her bed.

Are you OK? She had taken to asking him, not sure what else to say. *When can you come?* She couldn’t resist saying it while at the same time hating the thought of being one of those girls. *Are you mad at me?* And then, inevitably, it seemed to her later, he suggested that they should take a break.

‘Things are so crazy right now,’ he said. ‘I can’t keep you waiting for me, it’s not fair to you.’

‘I’ll wait,’ she had insisted. ‘I’ll wait forever. I don’t mind. I want to.’

‘No, it’s not right. I’m going to be leaving soon,’ he told her detachedly, and it felt like he was already at a great distance. ‘It’s not fair to you,’ he repeated, as though she cared what was fair to her when this was what she wanted. ‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be in a relationship right now, what with Keith dying and everything. I feel too fucked up to be with anyone.’

And then, in that panicked moment, she almost told him – but she was stunned into silence. It would scare him further away, she thought. *Be still*, she told herself. *Maybe things will go back to how they were.*

School was over. The windows opened and the family and friends returned slowly, but not Tim. Some of her brother’s other friends came by, but Aurelle stayed on the top floor in her room, looking out the window at the sky. Her life had changed radically, too, but no one noticed, none of them. Nothing, everything, had changed. A fan rotated, keeping the rising heat at bay. Aurelle lay on her bed, the covers a tangle around her, her head barely propped up with pillows. Days passed. Clouds moved over the sun. She wandered through the house in clothes that approximated pajamas. The family buzzed around her, everyone with things to do, sport activities, work events, passing through the kitchen, the living room, the front hall. Life as usual. Her mother kissed the top of her head as she rushed about. Her father gave her shoulders a squeeze. *Have you eaten, hon? You look pale. There’s food in the oven. Call me if you need anything. Byeee! Bye!*

Her first breakup, if they’d ever been together. No one had known they were sleeping together, but that made it sound only physical, superficial. She was a fool. She was humiliated. No one knew. Aurelle thought of her fingers wound around his, she thought of his thumb on her earlobe. She was grief-stricken, then guilt-ridden in the face of the real grief surrounding her. They used to have a phone signal. He’d call and let the phone ring once, then she would know to call him back. There had been nothing for two weeks. She had hoped against hope that he would come back to her. Even just for sex. *Maybe he knows*, she thought, daring to consider what lurked in her heart. *Maybe he knows and he thinks I’m a slut. Maybe he’s told everyone.* She considered trying to get rid of it. She was wracked with

embarrassment and shame, mostly because while her whole relationship now felt a figment, this thing was real. *The thing in there*, she thought, touching a finger to her soft midsection. She was afraid. She put it off. Avoiding, escaping, pretending. She didn't want to know.

And then, one afternoon when she was lying in the cool of the basement, staring mindlessly at the TV, the sound of her brothers and their friends in the pool coming dimly through the open window, her mother came down the stairs.

'Aurette, honey?' She said, her voice carrying a falseness to it that made Aurette immediately alert.

She sat up. 'Yes?'

'Diana is here,' she said lightly, gesturing with her arm up the stairs, out of sight.

Aurette looked at her and mouthed, *Who?*

'From next door. Come on down, Diana, honey. She's sitting down here in the dark for God knows why,' Marianne laughed, and Aurette watched as a figure appeared around the corner.

Diana stood there, tall and slim, wearing a long, tailored summer dress. She lifted a hand and said, in a low voice, 'Hello.'

'I saw Diana on my way out,' Marianne elaborated, 'and invited her in. Maybe you two can hang out together.' Aurette looked at her mother in barely disguised shock, but she ignored this, continuing on. 'There's food in the fridge down here, but you should go outside! It's a gorgeous day!'

Diana was looking at Marianne. She said, quietly, 'Thank you, Mrs Taylor.'

'It's Marianne, hon. We don't stand on ceremony here.' She put an arm around Diana and gave her a one-armed hug. Diana seemed to almost close her eyes and lean in, and Aurette felt embarrassed for her. Then Marianne looked at her watch and trilled, 'Oh God, I have to go. Bye, girls!' And she skipped away, leaving Aurette sitting on the couch with her hands in her lap, the TV playing a daytime soap she'd taken to watching.

Diana moved into the room and sat on the arm of a large chair covered in what Marianne called a 'happy' botanical pattern replete with bees and wild plants. She crossed one leg over the other and stared at the TV. Someone shrieked outside and there was a happy splash. Aurette also turned her attention to the TV but, even though she knew the plot and all of the

characters now, she couldn't pay attention or enjoy it any longer. She looked at Diana out of the corner of her eye.

'I'm sorry about your brother,' she said.

Diana nodded.

Aurette thought about this, then said, 'I guess that's what people say to you all the time now, right? You must get tired of it.'

Diana shrugged and said, 'One day no one will say anything.' She cleared her throat. 'One day no one will even know who he was.'

Aurette was shocked by the blunt force of this statement. 'Yeah. Shit.'

'Whatever,' Diana said, lighter now. 'No one knows what to say. But obviously I don't either.'

The stars of the soap opera began kissing passionately, and Aurette sniffed and said, 'You want to do something?'

'Sure.'

'We can't go in the pool because my brothers are in it.'

'That's OK.'

'Right. Sorry, that was stupid. You probably don't want to swim because of...'

'It's OK. I actually really like swimming. Maybe another time.'

There was a pause. Then Diana said, 'Do you want to go for a walk?'

'Yeah, sure.'

They got up and went to the foyer to put their shoes on. Aurette opened the front door and they stepped out, squinting at the sun.

Someone called out, 'Aurette! Aurette Taylor!' and she turned, heard the click of a camera held by a large man standing across the street.

'Come on,' Diana said in her ear and took her arm, wheeling Aurette away from the house while she herself turned to face the camera. Her bobbed hair swung around, her face hard and stony.

Later, that photo, which seemed a miss to the paparazzo at the time, would be printed over and over again. It would be captioned and analyzed, it would head off articles and think pieces. *Aurette Taylor and Diana Martin*. It was their first day together.

THEY WALKED AROUND THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD because neither of them could decide on anywhere to go or even offer any opinion. Aurelle couldn't put much effort into being friendly, but Diana didn't seem to care. Neither of them said much of anything but it felt alright just to be moving and to be in the world outside the house. The sun was beating down on the tops of their heads. Aurelle felt the heat radiating off her hair. Eventually they reached a more populated area with stores, and they approached a Mac's Milk shop.

'Wanna go in?' Diana asked. 'I'm thirsty.'

'Sure, OK. I didn't bring any money, though.' Aurelle knew she was being unfriendly, which was uncharacteristic of her, but Diana just shrugged. The door jangled when they opened it. It was cool inside and smelt of refrigerator and cheap air fresheners, and Aurelle put a finger under her nose to block it out. She swallowed, feeling a wave of nausea. She called over to Diana.

'I'm going to wait outside, OK? I just – I need air,' she finished, realizing after how stupid that sounded.

'K,' Diana said, walking deeper into the store.

Outside, Aurelle leaned against the brick façade of the building and watched as some pigeons fought over crumbs. Soon Diana came out with two banana-flavoured popsicles and handed one to Aurelle. They peeled off the wrappers and started walking again.

Aurelle looked at Diana and then straight ahead. She said, 'I'm pregnant.' The words came out and then they were out in the world, and she blinked slowly, waiting for them to land. She didn't know why she'd told Diana; she hardly knew her at all. That was why.

Diana looked at her. Aurelle could feel the expressionless gaze on her face. Her popsicle tasted like nothing.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Well. No, I guess not. But I think I am.'

Diana looked back over her shoulder and said, 'Stay here.' Aurelle watched her walk slowly back to the Mac's Milk and go inside. *Oh God*, she thought. *She's getting me a pregnancy test at a Mac's Milk.* Sure

enough, soon Diana was back with a small bag. ‘You can find out for sure,’ she said, handing it to Aurelle. Her voice was smooth and deep, and she wasn’t being gossipy or getting off on it. She was helping.

‘Did the guy say anything to you? About buying a test?’ Aurelle said, taking the bag, which felt weightless, like it contained nothing at all. Not everything.

‘No. He’s watching baseball on a little TV in there.’

‘OK. Well. Thank you.’

Diana lifted a shoulder. Up and down. Like it was nothing.

‘Um,’ Aurelle let out a forced laugh. ‘I don’t know why I told you.’

‘That’s OK. I won’t say anything.’ She paused. ‘I don’t have anyone to tell.’

‘Thanks.’ Aurelle held the bag at her side but wouldn’t look at it. ‘I guess I should do it somewhere that’s not home.’

‘Do you want to do it now?’

Aurelle said nothing, then: ‘I’m not a slut or anything.’ Her voice sounded small, thin.

Diana stopped and so Aurelle did, too. A kid rode past them on a bike.

‘No,’ Diana said. ‘You’re not.’

‘He was my first,’ Aurelle said, barely audible. She didn’t like the way that sounded. Like he was part of a list. She didn’t want to think about anyone who would be next. He was all she wanted. She was embarrassed at the thought, how naïve she sounded.

Diana nodded. She brushed some hair out of her face and chewed on the stick of her popsicle. They had reached a park beside an outdoor pool. There was a jungle gym and changing rooms. Aurelle used to take swimming lessons here, but she was never very good. She was the only one of her siblings not to get her Bronze Medallion level badge. The fact was that she hardly ever swam at all, even in their own pool.

‘He doesn’t know. The... the guy, I mean,’ she said now. ‘We’re not together anymore. Or never were, or something.’ She looked through the chain-link fence at children and families swimming, then turned to Diana and opened her eyes wide as though just realizing what she’d done, telling this almost-stranger. ‘You probably want to know who it is,’ she said, with an edge to her voice.

‘No,’ Diana said lightly. ‘I don’t.’ Then she gestured at the changing

rooms and said, 'There's a bathroom in there.'

The walls were concrete and there was a smell of damp towels and chlorine. Diana was waiting outside. Aurelle shut herself inside a stall and sat on the toilet, resisting the urge to pee until she needed to. She opened the bag and inspected the box, trying to understand the directions, to absorb the information, but her mind was a blur, foggy. Someone jostled the door and she froze, but they moved on, children giggling, parents cajoling. *Here, dry your feet before you put your socks back on. Lean on me.* She looked at the stick applicator then held it under her, peeing all over it and wondering if she had compromised the results by getting it too wet. Her hand shook. She withdrew it and sat staring at the applicator until it told her the answer.

Diana was sitting on a curb in the parking lot across from the pool, her long legs stretched out, looking at a family in the park. Aurelle came around the side of the changing rooms and Diana seemed to instinctively sense she was there, turning her head. She raised her eyebrows in question. Aurelle nodded, once. *Yes.* Her feet seemed to be lifting off the ground as she approached Diana, who was getting up now. *She is so strange,* Aurelle thought, somewhere in the murkiness of her mind. *She is so unusual.* She reached Diana and they stood facing each other. And then Diana put both her arms around Aurelle, who stood with hers limply at her sides, and she held her close, she held her with strength, almost with force. Aurelle could hear her own heart; she could hear Diana's, too. She smelled Diana's skin, her clothes, something she couldn't pinpoint. Cloves? She closed her eyes and relaxed her body, submitting to Diana's, who submitted to hers.

MOST STUDENTS LIVED IN ONE of the two residences at Rocky Barrens: Segwun or Torrance, microcosms of teenagers trying to be adults, but pushing everything to excess – music, drugs, drinking, dancing, eating, sex. There was a pulsing energy to everything they did. Like at camp, there was a ‘Polar Bear Dip’ each morning at seven. A large, wrought iron bell hung on a beam on the front porch of Segwun and gonged to notify those courageous enough to brave the freezing lake. When the weather cooled, they called it off altogether, although the bell continued to be rung at all hours by anyone who could reach it. Diana and Aurelle could hear the bell from their cottage across the lake, its echoes ringing eerily over the water in the dark and fog.

Now, Diana was focused intently on her easel at the Art Den.

‘If you could pause for a moment,’ Grace called to the circle of students. They had been occupied with a painting exercise they’d been assigned a week ago: a portrait of someone on campus. Diana’s, a richly coloured close-up of Aurelle, had attracted the attention of her peers for its obvious expertise in working with oils. Diana had a tireless work ethic and had developed her skills in long days and evenings when she was younger, before and during her friendship with Aurelle. The art teacher at their high school had recognized her potential and had allowed her to stay late in the classroom after school, encouraging her with extra attention and advice. But for all of that, she knew she had an innate talent: something that wasn’t taught, but that could be honed. An understanding of colour and light. She was used to praise for her work, and so when she caught other students standing at her easel, commenting on her work, she took it in stride.

She put her brush down and turned her attention to Grace, who waited for them all to stop working.

‘What I am going to ask of you will seem unreasonable and you will not like it. But there is a purpose to it, so bear with me. For the moment, I’d like you to leave your brushes where they are and move to the easel to your right. For the next half-hour, you will work on the painting of the colleague next to you.’ There was some murmuring and exchanged looks. Kim,

stationed again to Diana's right, looked quickly up at her, eyebrows raised, mouth turned up slightly.

'You'd better not fuck this up,' she said lightly, and held Diana's gaze for a moment before laughing.

Grace continued, 'I am asking you to do this so that you learn not to be precious about your work, yes – but the truth is that we often are and, some might argue, should be. However, you also need to learn that others, specifically other artists, may have a lot to teach you simply by being different from you. You will learn that there are infinite ways in which a painting can be rendered, in which the concept can be composed. There are different styles, palettes, ideas. Each painting is potentially a thousand paintings. As in life, it is the burden of choice that determines everything, big and small. Don't let it paralyze you. It is up to you to decide the best route for yours. As the new artist working on someone else's piece, you also have choices to make. Do you insert yourself there, make an imprint, or stay the course? So!' She clapped her hands together. 'Off you go.'

Noah, to Diana's left, ducked his head and moved apologetically towards Diana, who took Kim's space. Kim was working on a portrait of the RBU librarian, an exceptionally tall man in his forties, who stooped and loped through the stacks of books. Her style was quick, impressionistic, and she used large brushes and bold colours. Diana considered the piece, pointedly ignoring Noah at her own easel – any errors he made could be quickly remedied. She picked up Kim's brush and palette, a piece of cardboard with a smattering of colour on it. She could see, from what Kim had done thus far, that she was uncomfortable with painting figures. The setting, the cozy library, had been given the most attention, but the librarian himself was still barely a sketch. Within the assigned half-hour, Diana was able to bring his form into being. He became recognizable through the way in which he leaned, a long finger reaching out to touch the spine of a book.

'Hey, that looks really good,' Noah said to her, his voice cutting through her thoughts. Kim, who Diana knew had been paying very close attention and had hardly touched the painting she'd moved in front of, looked away, her cheeks flushing pink. Diana gave Noah a small smile and looked at her painting of Aurelle. Noah had essentially gone over her own brushstrokes, frightened to try anything at all.

'I won't be mad if you try something,' she said to him.

He coloured. ‘Oh, I mean...’ He gestured at the canvas. ‘What could I do? It’s so good already.’ And Diana was reminded that imagination and ideas, an eye for things, was not everyone’s strong suit. He could think of nothing, and so that is what he did.

Grace appeared at her shoulder, and Diana turned to face her professor. Thinking of the librarian, she tried not to stoop while addressing the petite woman. Grace kept her eyes on Kim’s painting and said, ‘Excellent, Diana. I think you’ve helped Kim a great deal.’ Diana almost laughed when Grace turned to Kim and said, ‘Try to be gracious, Kim. This is not your life’s work; it’s only an assignment.’ She turned and moved on, ignoring Noah completely.

Those first few perfect weeks, autumn at RBU, Aurelle’s life with Diana in the cottage – it almost made up for everything that came before, everything that came later. That soft cushion of anonymity, of falling backward and not touching the ground, no hard truth, no awakening. It was a dream she hadn’t known she needed, and which, once it eluded her, she couldn’t help but chase. Aurelle was shy and good-natured, kind and open-hearted. She lacked the ambition and killer instinct that were marks of both her mother and Diana. She loved to be around people, but only as a means of letting herself escape into a crowd, into a conversation – never to be the center of it. Disappearing was her favourite state of being.

That night, The Velvet Underground came through the trees as Aurelle followed the path to the Den. And then, there it was: the building itself, glowing in the darkness like an orb, orange light streaming through the windows, students smoking and hanging out on its large wraparound deck. She tried not to stare at anyone but stole glances: guys she knew from previous visits to the studio lounged about in cocktail dresses; a half-naked woman danced on a table in the light of the window; two girls kissed passionately against the railing of the deck. All of them were so sure of themselves, no one looked at her or recognized her; everything seemed loose and sensual and she loved it. She had gone to another party first, knowing she’d eventually meet up with Diana here. They always found one another in the end. She walked through the open door with a smile on her face and was quickly enveloped in a smoky hug by Kim, whom she knew through Diana.

‘Aurette, hey!’ Kim called, grabbing her hand and dragging her through the packed room to where some first-year students stood around a semi-circle of propped easels. Each easel displayed a painted portrait. Some faces, some full-bodies.

‘Hey, look at you,’ said one guy, slurring a little. ‘Wow, you’re pretty. Do I know you? You look really familiar.’ He brushed a hair out of her eyes, then said, ‘Sorry, I’m a little drunk.’ He handed her an unopened beer he’d been holding. ‘Here, you can have this. I’m Noah.’

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I’m Aurette.’ She gestured at the portraits. ‘So, did you do any of these?’

‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘They hide mine.’

‘Oh yeah?’ she said, smiling. ‘I’m sure that’s not true.’

‘Well, I do OK. I’m better at sculpture. I’m not the star of the class in painting, that’s for sure,’ he smiled. ‘There’s this girl who – never mind. Anyway, these are all portraits of people on campus. They have a little more personality than twenty studies of Tom, the nude model guy, or Jeanette, the nude model lady.’

‘People on campus?’ Aurette looked closer at the paintings and saw that, yes, she did recognize some faces. ‘Is that my history prof?’ she giggled, pointing to a painting done in large brushstrokes of a man in a Speedo, hands on hips, who was, unmistakably, Dr Hughes.

‘Yup,’ said Noah, reaching for a beer from a cooler nearby. ‘He runs the Polar Dip Club. And the rowing team. Anywhere he can wear his swimsuit, I think.’

Aurette smiled. ‘I was watching the rowers the other day. They’re still out there, even in the cold.’ She hesitated. ‘One of my brothers is a rower. I grew up around those guys.’ A shadow passed over her face as she thought of her other life. ‘How late does the season run?’

‘God, I think until the lake freezes over. They’re crazy.’ They looked over as a small group of students began dancing in the center of the room, their bodies swaying, tangled arms around shoulders, necks, backs. Other students joined in, and the windows steamed up around them. When she turned back, Noah was looking at her differently. ‘Why do you look so familiar to me?’

Aurette shrugged in what she hoped was a natural way.

He cocked his head. ‘Oh!’ he gasped, dribbling beer on his shirt. ‘I know!’

You're Diana's girl!

'Pardon?'

Noah grabbed her arm and pulled Aurelle to one of the easels nearby. Looking back at her was her own face, and she remembered that Diana had told her she'd used one of her sketches for an assignment. In the small painting study, she was looking just outside the frame. Her light hair fell softly around her face. Her dark brown eyes looked a little troubled.

Aurelle felt strange looking at this rendition of herself in the presence of someone else. Diana had been drawing her since they became friends. She liked that Diana did this, and marveled at her friend's skill. She had never seen them outside Diana's sketchbook before, though. It had always felt like a private thing between them. She knew Noah was watching her, and she recovered quickly. She saw the love in the image, felt it radiate from the small canvas.

'Oh yeah,' she said, smiling at Noah.

'You're Diana's "person at RBU,"' he said, happy to have made the connection. 'Well, it's nice to put a name to a face, Aurelle.' His brow furrowed then, and she saw the realization dawn on him in his drunken state. 'So... does that mean you're... aren't you someone's daughter? I thought I heard something like that.' He laughed then at the stupidity of this statement, and Aurelle gave him an out, saying she was going to look for Diana. He saluted her drunkenly, said he hoped to see her soon, and wandered away to join a group of guys he'd just noticed arrive. Aurelle took a last look at the painting and turned away herself, wandering through the studio rooms like she was following a thread that would bring her to Diana.

Eventually, they sat together on some tree stumps outside the Den. Aurelle told her she'd seen the painting.

'I like it,' she said, smiling up into Diana's face.

Diana waved her away. 'It was just an assignment.'

'You're working hard there. Seems like people are noticing. I'm sure my mom would love to see what you're doing.' She said this as a gift; she didn't like to think of her family, but knew the impact of bringing up her mother to Diana.

'Well.' Aurelle noticed an uncharacteristic blush on Diana's cheeks. 'I'm sure she'll see my work when she next visits,' she continued, as though it

had just occurred to her to show Marianne her progress. ‘I can’t believe she was once a student here!’

This was something Diana had learned from Aurelle, that had solidified her desire to attend RBU. To think she had studied in the same studio, walked the same trails, maybe even had the same professors, made Diana feel more of a kindred spirit, more connected to the woman with whom she wished she shared actual DNA.

‘Yeah,’ Aurelle muttered, struck by the thought that there was nothing in the world untouched by her mother. Imagining Marianne returning for a visit, her old life coming here, Aurelle frowned.

Diana chided her. ‘You should be proud to be who you are, you know. You should be proud of your mom, too.’

‘I *am* proud,’ she said.

And she was. Diana had not been the first person to say this. Growing up, she played in her mother’s studio, draping fabrics around herself, pretending that she was making dresses and fancy clothes. As a young girl, she had been photographed alongside her mother at fashion shows or for articles about the couture designer. Even then, something about it felt like artifice. Photos of the family’s only daughter looking away from the camera while standing beside Marianne simply drove interest in fashion circles to see more of her. And then there was the ‘girl in the cherry tee’ night, when she became inadvertently iconic. The more she withdrew, the more people wanted her front and center.

Meanwhile, Diana recalled being at Aurelle’s house for a recent photo shoot for *Vogue*. In addition to the journalist, there were hair and makeup artists, photographers, stylists, publicists and more. The house had been filled to bursting.

‘I wish I could just sneak out,’ Aurelle had said quietly to her.

They were in the kitchen, the counters and island laden with Kraft services for the shoot. Aurelle looked towards the backyard, where her mother’s laugh had just rung out. ‘I know she wants me here,’ she said, ‘but I just... ugh.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Can’t you just see everyone from school dissecting the whole thing?’

Diana lifted a shoulder. ‘Maybe. But everyone likes you.’ She stated this as fact, and it was, they both knew that, but Aurelle sighed again.

‘I don’t want to do it.’

‘They’ve planned on you being in it. You and your brothers. But’ – Diana gestured at her friend – ‘most importantly, you.’

‘I know,’ Aurelle wrung her hands. ‘And it is important to her, right?’

Diana nodded. ‘Of course it is. It’s everything to her. She needs you as part of the “whole package.” You’re kind of the unintended face of the brand. If you suddenly decided not to join in, it would cause an even bigger stir. I’m sure that’s the last thing you want.’

Aurelle bit her thumbnail as Marianne appeared through the patio door, her hair tied in a flattering ponytail, dressed in cigarette trousers and a button-down shirt tied at the waist. She looked stylish and youthful, her smile contagious. Diana couldn’t help beaming back at her.

‘There you are!’ Her voice was light, but there was tension behind it. ‘Aurelle, the stylist is going to get you changed and ready now, OK?’ She cocked her head at her daughter and clicked her tongue. ‘Oh, honey. I’m sorry. I know this isn’t your favourite thing.’ She took Aurelle’s chin in her hand and kissed her cheek. ‘It will be over before you know it.’

Aurelle looked down and nodded. ‘I know. It’s fine. I’m sorry. It’s just really not my thing.’

Marianne smiled at Diana and shook her head in mock exasperation. ‘Well! Maybe you should have thought of that before you stole the heart of every raver kid in the city!’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Can you believe our girl, Diana? Any kid your age would love to trade places with her!’ She shook Aurelle’s shoulders lightly. ‘Ask Diana,’ Marianne said. Then, to Diana, ‘Back me up here, artist to artist.’

Before Diana could respond, Marianne continued, ‘Diana, I wish *you* could be in the photo, too, but you know how they get.’ She gestured at the photographers. ‘They just want family. And, I mean,’ she waved a hand at Diana, whose outfit was nothing like the styling for the shoot, in her Lacoste shirt and shorts. ‘I know you wouldn’t want to be part of this anyway. But, please, tell your friend here why she needs to get her tuchus outside!’

She grinned pleadingly at Diana.

Diana took her cigarettes out of her pocket and walked to the patio door, opening it. ‘It’s true,’ she said, stepping out into the sunshine, the frantic activity of the shoot evident in the people rushing around the yard and deck. ‘It all works because of you. You’re very lucky.’ She closed the door and

looked back inside, through the glass, as she lit her cigarette.

Marianne kissed Aurelle's forehead then shooed her from the kitchen. She caught Diana's eye and mouthed, *thank you!* And there was that thread between them – the thing that wasn't mother-daughter but different, special, better, better than family – and it tightened ever so slightly. Diana smiled in return. *Artist to artist.*

'I am proud,' Aurelle repeated to Diana now.

'Yes, of course,' said Diana lightly, and put her hand on Aurelle's. They were both lost for a moment, each thinking of the genesis of their friendship.

Diana breathed in, deeply, and looked around. The moment had passed. 'Shall we fill our glasses and explore?' She picked up a half-bottle of wine at her feet and filled Aurelle's glass, careful not to spill it. Then she stood, dusting herself off, stretching her long frame, and helped Aurelle up.

'Let's shall,' Aurelle said, laughing, clinking glasses with Diana. And they did.

They walked through the trees as a chorus of Canadian geese soared overhead, their honking fading, as ever, over the lake.

THEY HAD AN UNDERSTANDING. *No one knows you like I know you.* They were special. Different. They were linked by something unspoken; they respected one another so deeply that they only wanted the other to be happy. Who had that? No one. This was true modern companionship. This was a relationship with no possession, no jealousy. They were young. They were beautiful. They were in the middle of a sexual awakening and they were in the woods with all manner of young bodies, drugs, music, booze and opportunities.

There were art shows and plays and concerts. Yowling in the trees, laughter echoing off the bark like bird calls. There were evenings of poetry at the café and skinny dipping in the lake en masse. Did they have friends? Of a sort. Sometimes, they hooked up with people, and found each other later and laughed about it. Mostly, Aurelle did this, and Diana saw how she seemed to become energized by random deep dives into one person or another, coming into focus through these experiences. Diana wasn't threatened by anything, by anyone. She had arrived at her potential and so was generous, magnanimous, doting. If she came upon Aurelle with someone – usually a boy, occasionally a girl, sometimes both – she would turn and light a cigarette, walk to a house party or a bonfire or back to the Art Den. She would skirt the gatherings like a bird caressing the water mid-flight; close enough to laugh, to pass a joint, to offer the bottle of wine she had brought in her bag. Close enough to be noticed but not caught. They could get near to complete abandon then retreat to the Martin cottage, their castle in the trees, just across the water.

The other students were aware of them, Aurelle and Diana, even those not in the art program, even if not by their names. *Those girls.* There they were in a small boat, rowing around the edges of the lake, the sun glinting off their hair: the tall one with the bob, the small one with the long hair, the red lipstick. In the dining hall, sitting across from one another, each reading to herself. Sometimes, they were noticed individually, like when Aurelle was seen having lunch at a small café in nearby Haliburton with a very stylish woman who was wearing a hat low over her eyes. *Was it her mother?* There

were rumours that her mother was the famous Marianne Taylor, designer of bold and colourful rave wear that had taken their generation by storm – the woman who was featured in magazines and billboards, in photos of fashion week, sitting with Karl Lagerfeld and Anna Wintour, and who had crossed over from couture to streetwear, from fur to fun fur. Here was her daughter. *And look*, the whispers drifted up into the pines like smoke. *There goes the other one*. The taller girl, the artist, her long tan skirt flapping maniacally behind her, on her way to the Den.

They dressed more formally than the rest of the campus, like models from *Town and Country*. Blazers, ironed shirts, hounds-tooth – all while everyone else was wearing cords and flannel or oversized sneakers or, particularly, MT clothes, which were everywhere. Even the way they spoke to each other set them apart: so polite, so deferential, so respectful. Like women, not girls, even though they were just as young as the other students. They seemed to know one another's rhythms, but, even more so, they sounded alike, spoke with the same lilt, the same mannerisms. Despite their contrasting looks, they seemed almost to be from the same family, they were so strangely similar. But they weren't sisters. And, though they appeared so much the same to outsiders, they couldn't have been more different.

Their home was an object of curiosity. Sometimes, ostensibly on a hike or walking in that area, a group of RBU kids might walk past the house and pause in front. Through the windows, Diana and Aurelle could see them: a finger pointing at the largesse of the house, its modern design that seemed borne of rock and wood and stretched into the trees in all directions. Some people knew that the girls lived there alone. Others said someone had died there, too. Versions of stories mutated and flipped on themselves, pieces of truth littered among the detritus of gossip. The whisper of this information had made its way through RBU in the morning fog across the lake, in the chatter of rowers in training, in the curiosity of students who explored the area beyond the campus. By the light of day, these clusters of students couldn't see into the windows, behind which the girls stood, looking back at them, protected. There was the occasional night, however, when a group of drunk college kids would be walking past and see the girls inside their home, the warmth of their fire and light exposing them to the outside world. The kids would wave, holler at them: *come out, come join, come to the*

Barrens and stargaze! Diana and Aurelle would stare back, caught. Aurelle would freeze in a kind of remembering – the flash of cameras, the scrutiny of her past – until Diana would walk to the wall and flick out the light, returning them to secrecy, to unknowability. Groans of disappointment would ripple from the gravel road for a few minutes, and the girls would sit out of view, waiting, until the strangers moved on, their voices carrying down and away, into the woods.

One day, Aurelle suggested they should go together to stargaze. Students went all the time, up at the Rocky Barrens Dark Sky Reserve. She'd seen the poster for it nailed to a bulletin board on a tree between her classes.

'I've never been,' she said to Diana later that day. 'Everyone always talks about it, and it's so close to the cottage.'

Diana nodded, starting the car. She put her arm around Aurelle's seat and turned her head, backing out of the drive and onto the dirt road. 'It's always been a thing around here. Our parents used to take us, and then we used to go later by ourselves, when we were older, before...' her voice drifted. 'I mean,' she continued, looking at Aurelle. 'It's mostly just rocks and hardly any trees. You know that, right? It truly is *barren*.'

'I know. But you can see the stars better there. I bet it's really pretty.'

Aurelle looked sideways at her friend. Diana had been here when her brother had died. The very day. The place must hold so many awful memories, and yet Diana was willing to live here in spite of it, to move to the very place it happened and start anew. Aurelle marveled at Diana's stoic strength. She reached out and touched Diana's hair, and Diana turned, giving her a rare smile.

Rocky Barrens itself, some distance from where the college was erected, was designated as the first official Canadian Dark Sky Reserve just the year before, meaning no one could build on or close to that land. The sky above it was protected for stargazing. Its landscape was scraggy, uninhabitable, and yes, barren. The rocks formed a natural place to gaze, in that they were largely flat and clumped together. Students regularly hiked to the area with blankets and flasks, sprawling on the rocks and staring above them at the riot of stars splashed across the sky. Diana had been with her brother when they were young and had loved it, mesmerized and dazzled by the beauty and magic, happy to have someone to share it with, even him. But then,

later, Keith would take girlfriends along with them, and Diana would pretend not to know about the whispering and murmuring under the blanket nearby. She would pull her knees to her chest and try to look at the stars, try so hard to stare at them, but something in the magic was tainted. She blinked, recalibrating.

‘It is pretty,’ she said now to Aurelle. ‘Yes, let’s go. You’ll love it.’

That evening, they dressed warmly for the late fall weather, packed a thermos of hot cider with whiskey in it along with two blankets, and left the cottage to hike out to Rocky Barrens Reserve. Diana had a walking stick, and the sound of it hitting the ground with each step was a rhythmic comfort as they walked the road away from the more populated cottage area towards the roots and rocks of the hiking pathways. It was a quiet and clear night, as predicted, the best kind for stargazing; some light snowfall the only threat to their view of the stars. They talked about their families. Aurelle knew that Diana didn’t like talking about her parents, whom she associated with grief and sadness, with a son frozen at the peak of his youth, their lonely home next to the Taylors’, but Aurelle liked the Martins and so she asked how they were doing.

‘OK, I guess.’ Her stick thudded in the ground. Aurelle waited. Diana shrugged and continued in her low voice. ‘It’s not easy for them.’

‘Yeah, I can imagine.’

Diana looked at Aurelle and said, ‘But, you know, I think they’re happy for us, being here, living at the cottage. It’s nice that it’s getting some use. I don’t know what they would have done with it if we weren’t living here. They haven’t been since... you know.’

Aurelle nodded. Her own mother hadn’t been thrilled that the girls were going to live at the cottage, and had suggested to Aurelle that she try residence first to get the ‘real college experience’ – this, Aurelle had never told Diana. Now, she asked how Diana’s artwork was going, knowing this would give her friend a lift, turn her mind, and it did. Diana’s voice gained energy: she talked about some of the other artists and their assignments in detail, as well as her frustrations, and Aurelle’s thoughts drifted a little. She thought of her own classes. She was discovering that, while she loved reading, she struggled with what her professors called ‘critical analysis.’ She had a hard time writing the papers, preferring just to let the books and

stories she loved exist on their own, in their own worlds, without dissection. She missed discussing books with Diana, who didn't have the time she used to have to read, not now that she was so committed to her art. Aurelle took in a breath of cold air, deep into her lungs, looked at the snow dusting the ground as they walked, listening to Diana, her calming voice, and she felt so deeply at ease. She reached a mittened hand out and grasped Diana's, who smiled and gave her a squeeze, continuing on animatedly about her work.

'...But I feel like I need to do something big, you know? I need to make an impression, beyond just skill.' She paused. 'I need Marianne's opinion. I took some photos of the paintings in progress and am just waiting on getting them developed. I'll mail them to her, you know, for her feedback.'

Aurelle nodded. Diana kept up with her mother more than she did. She didn't mind, mostly; it relieved her of the duty and burden of being a Taylor, and left her to float, invisible, with the sense of detachment from her family that she enjoyed. It was a bit unusual, she knew, that her friend and her mother were so close, had so much in common. Diana sent Marianne letters, clippings about her art if she participated in some impromptu 'crit session' that was written up in the school paper. Sometimes Diana would nod at her while on the phone and mouth, *Do you want to say hi?* Aurelle would shake her head and go into another room where she couldn't hear Diana's voice, updating Marianne on her art and the school and, inevitably, how Aurelle was doing. She wasn't sure why she didn't want to talk to her mother, or at least why she avoided her. It was so easy to compartmentalize her life here with Diana; it was like her past hadn't happened. Whenever she did talk to Marianne, she felt tense, anxious, even though her mother was nothing but loving and doting. She wanted to protect the cocooned life she had with Diana, where she was free from opinion or judgement, for good or bad. Perhaps it was that she had nothing to tell: she wasn't as driven as Diana, and couldn't gather up the enthusiasm for a big chat. She felt the guilt of it wash over her, and then put it out of her mind.

Whenever Diana had finished talking to Marianne, she was always happy. She would find Aurelle and chatter enthusiastically, relaying whatever Marianne had said – *she was sorry not to talk to you, of course* – and everything they had discussed in terms of Diana's work. She would hug Aurelle tightly and say, *Aren't we lucky for our family?*

‘She’s coming to visit, did I tell you?’ Diana said now.

‘She is?’

‘Yeah, I spoke to her yesterday.’

‘Did she call?’ Aurelle asked.

‘Um,’ Diana took a long stride to avoid a root. ‘I can’t remember. I called her, I think.’

Aurelle smiled at her friend, then tripped. Diana’s strong hand gripping hers saved her from a fall.

There was a large crowd sprawled out on the Barrens when they eventually climbed up onto the rocky surface. People had spread out blankets, were speaking in low voices, almost reverently. There was an unspoken rule, it seemed, that the Barrens was a quiet place, particularly during stargazing time – one of the only ones at RBU, where usually music and laughter coursed like blood. Of the people there, many were not students, but cottagers and locals, ranging in age from children to seniors. This was one of the few places where RBU students and the local population overlapped amicably. Since the college had reopened, there had been regular friction between the groups about the noise coming from the campus disturbing the lifestyle of those who lived and summered around it. But tonight, people were chatting kindly, making room for each other, appreciative of this special place. Diana helped Aurelle up onto the flat rocks, and they walked gingerly across, careful not to step on blankets, searching for their own spot. Aurelle smiled at other students, keen for the shared experience, and pointed out an available area at the perimeter of the rocks.

They opened their blankets onto the ground, awkwardly sat down, then found comfortable positions to lie back in, their faces turned upward. Aurelle leaned back, feeling the solidity of the rocks, their literal grounding reassuring, but also a reminder that she sometimes felt she might lift up and fly away if there wasn’t something to hold her down – if not for Diana. She closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them again and looked up, there was, indeed, something to behold. While she had seen the same beautiful sky a number of times from the cottage, the lake, the campus, there was something about the wide-open space of Rocky Barrens that made it all the more magnificent. The silhouette of the occasional tree was all that disrupted the sparkle of the stars, sprayed all over the black sky in

an unfathomable number. Whatever words she could use would sound trite, no descriptors coming close to the swell she felt in her lungs, the lump in her throat. She felt at peace here. Lying against the rock, hearing the murmur of others all around her, tears welled in her eyes, ran in streams down the sides of her face. She curled into Diana, who wrapped an arm around her. The rock beneath her and her friend beside her; in that moment, she felt that she could never float away.

THE DAY AFTER AURELLE HAD taken the pregnancy test that Diana had bought for her, she worried about whether you could trust someone so completely, so quickly. *Yes*, she decided. And she did.

‘I’m going over to Diana’s,’ Aurelle told her mother, flipping through a magazine on the table rather than making eye-contact.

‘You are? Oh, that’s *wonderful*, honey. I’m sure she could use a friend.’ She came and hugged Aurelle from behind. ‘You are so thoughtful. I’m so proud of you.’

Diana had told her about the Morgentaler Clinic on Harbord Street. Aurelle had been on that street many times, but never noticed it. She’d heard about him, of course; he was famous. An old man whose picture she’d seen in the paper before. He boldly stood up for a woman’s right to a safe abortion: not mincing his words, his actions or his stance. It was admirable, but had seemed like something that was far away, something in which Aurelle could believe without participating. But now...

After the pregnancy test, Diana had asked, ‘Do you know what you want to do?’

‘Yes,’ Aurelle had said.

Diana never asked her if she was sure; she never told her to think about it, or tried to offer anything other than the location where they could go. ‘I’ll go with you, if you want,’ she’d said in her direct way of speaking.

‘Yes,’ Aurelle had said, again.

‘We’ll make the appointment from my house. No one will notice. They’re very preoccupied with the death of their son,’ Diana continued, with what Aurelle was learning was her characteristic frankness.

Aurelle’s eyebrows had knit together. ‘Sorry. I don’t want to add to your troubles.’

And Diana had put out a hand and said, gently, ‘Please, don’t ever think that.’ And Aurelle knew she meant it, because Diana didn’t say anything she didn’t mean – that much was clear already.

Diana unlocked the front door and held it open for Aurelle, who walked in cautiously. It occurred to her that this was the first time she had ever been

inside the Martins' home, at least in her memory. The front hall was cool and stark, the stylings early-century modern, which Aurelle usually quite liked. But, here, it felt chilly, like there was too much space, too many hard edges. So few windows, and so much wood. The house was faithful to its architectural origins in decoration and design. Rich, dark rugs and small lamps. Diana carefully hung her keys on a small shelf with three hooks and nothing else; it was the act of an organized mind, of a person well-versed in simple, good habits. Aurelle observed this, thinking of her own home next door where a large yellow bench housed jackets and knapsacks and purses in regular rotation, and of the walls they had knocked down to 'improve flow.' The rooms here were closed off from one another by walls and doors.

'Where are your parents?' she asked, her voice just above a whisper.

'At the gravesite. Again.' Diana led Aurelle into the house, past an expansive and immaculate dining room. Vases of flowers sat on the low wooden credenza, the fireplace mantle and the dining room table. Aurelle realized that these were sympathy flowers, and a chill crept up her arms. Keith was gone. In the midst of her own crisis, Aurelle had given little thought to Keith's death. The house, which she now imagined had barely contained Keith's bold and bullish personality, seemed to echo silence. She found herself perversely wondering where his room was, if it still contained all of his things, his school uniform, ball caps, the years' worth of stuff that defined who people were in the world. But she walked with Diana into the kitchen, where she was handed a cool glass of water from a stylish water dispenser filled with sliced lemons. They sat opposite each other at a circular table. Aurelle held her glass against her cheek.

She then followed Diana into the home office and watched her take a seat at a clean-lined desk with a shiny black telephone. It was an empty, stylish, serious home, and Aurelle felt small there. Yet, she was relieved that they were doing this here. She was paranoid that someone would find out that she had called the abortion clinic if they did it from her own house – that there would be a record of her predicament somewhere, that someone would walk in while they were talking, or pick up the other end of the phone to make a call. Here, there was no one.

She submitted to the care that Diana offered her, which was not doting, but cool and clear. She seemed to instinctively know when Aurelle needed brevity and conciseness, and when she needed compassion. To think that

she'd lived next door all this time was surprising to Aurelle, who had never paid Diana any attention at all other than when she overheard Keith's version of her. They ran in different circles. Aurelle's friends were sweet and pretty, polite and popular. Familiar faces. Friends from childhood. But, in the end, she didn't want to tell any of them. Diana was so sure of herself. In hindsight, Aurelle remembered having seen her chatting with teachers, walking with girls or guys who were not on Aurelle's radar, hands in pockets, nodding thoughtfully. She seemed more grown up, somehow, than everyone else in their grade. She carried a brown leather satchel rather than a knapsack. She wore flats, not sneakers. Even in Phys Ed, she appeared from another age, her lanky frame and angled bob haircut lending a seriousness to every activity.

'Are you sure you don't mind?' Aurelle asked, putting her glass on the desk.

'Of course not.' Diana paused before adding, 'I think you would do the same for me.' This bold statement so early in their friendship surprised Aurelle. She hoped it was true.

'Yeah, of course,' she nodded.

There was silence between them. Diana looked out a large, round window that offered a view of the trees between their houses.

'I was always jealous of your family,' she said quietly.

This was not the first time Aurelle had heard this. Her family, in its warm hospitality, its fame, its sheer volume, had long drawn envy from many people she encountered. But there was something in Diana's forthrightness that struck deep inside, and the statement was somehow more earnest, truer than any other time she'd heard it. She remembered, suddenly, the shadow of movement behind the upstairs curtains of the Martins' house, and her heart ached for the Diana she'd never known until now. Aurelle didn't respond. She waited, watching her new friend.

'Your whole family seems to really love each other,' Diana continued, keeping her eyes on the window. 'Like, they have love to spare.'

Aurelle thought about this, and supposed it was true. Although she felt that none of them had ever truly known her or even let her find out who she was, she had never wanted for overt and publicly demonstrated love, for support, for company.

'I guess we're lucky,' she said, shrugging.

‘Yes,’ Diana said, looking at her now, almost reproachfully. ‘You *are*.’ And then the moment passed, and Diana cleared her throat and smiled. ‘So, let’s do this so you can go back to being lucky, shall we?’

Diana looked up the phone number for the clinic in the *Yellow Pages* and put a long finger under it, pointing. Aurelle lifted the phone from the receiver and dialed, but when a voice answered, she found she couldn’t say anything at all. Diana deftly took the phone from her. Aurelle sat a few feet away in a large leather chair and watched Diana, listening. She saw her transform into a kind of mirror image – into Aurelle. Her voice lifting; her body changing, almost shrinking; her choice of words cribbed from Aurelle’s own mouth. Diana turned to look at Aurelle, who was frozen in disbelief. She smiled and, thanking the person on the other end, hung up.

‘Wow,’ Aurelle said in a near-whisper. ‘You sounded just like me.’

Diana shrugged, returning to her own self. ‘I guess we kind of sound alike.’

‘I guess,’ Aurelle said, considering this.

‘Mind you, I do pay attention. To how people are – talk, look, you know.’

‘They wouldn’t have known the difference.’

‘Still. I like to do a thing right,’ Diana said.

AFTER THE ABORTION, AURELLE LAY in the coolness of Diana's living room. There was cramping, but it was bearable. She'd taken some Advil. Diana was reading aloud to her from *The Outsiders*, a book Aurelle loved and was delighted to see on Diana's shelf, too.

'How are you feeling?' Diana asked, putting the book aside and looking at Aurelle, who was pale, her hair sweaty and pushed off of her forehead.

'Relieved,' she said.

'Good.' Diana got up to clear some plates from their lunch. Aurelle reached out and touched her wrist.

'Diana?' she said, her voice catching.

'Yes?'

'Thanks.'

Diana put the plates back on the table and sat on the edge of the couch. She smiled lightly, as was her way, Aurelle was learning, and said, 'It's no big deal.'

'It is. I will never forget it.'

Diana cleared her throat. 'Well.' She looked away.

'Truly.'

Aurelle squeezed Diana's hand, and Diana's voice, normally so sure, was also thick with emotion as she said, 'I needed you, too.' And then, while she was holding Aurelle's hand, she said something she had never and would never tell another living soul.

Diana and Aurelle. No one knew why these two girls, who were never friends before, were suddenly together all the time. Aurelle never called her other school friends anymore. Those girls who were so nice and sweet and kind, but who seemed to lack the worldly wisdom and nuance of Diana, which Aurelle now knew she'd also been missing. They all still came over and hung out at the house with her brothers, floating on the pool toys, stretching out on the barker loungers, watching the way that Aurelle and Diana kept to themselves, one pair of earphones and a Sony Walkman between them.

Their idiosyncrasies, their gestures and ways of talking began to morph.

They already had a similar lilt to their voices, that which was common among the wealthy girls of their neighbourhood, but, in addition, they took on one another's expressions, their ticks and pauses and ways of being. They began to overlap and they loved it. The other kids whispered about them, even while Marianne brought them drinks and snacks, but the two didn't care. They listened to The Pixies and closed their eyes against the bright sun.

'Do your parents care that you're here all the time?' Aurelle asked one morning as they sat at the pool edge, their legs dangling in the water.

'No,' Diana said. Then, 'They don't notice me at all.'

'I'm sure that's not true,' said Aurelle. She thought of Mrs and Mr Martin, for whom she always felt she had to be on her best behaviour, even before she and Diana became friends. They were formal and removed, as though from another age.

'They should have stopped after having Keith,' Diana said. 'He was their life.'

Aurelle pulled her feet out of the water and crossed them under her. The cement around the pool was cool. She knew that by the afternoon it would be too hot to walk on barefoot. She looked at Diana: her strong body, her striking features. She asked, 'Why was he so mean to you?'

Diana looked away and Aurelle saw the back of her neck reddening. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I shouldn't have brought that up. I just... I always wondered. Even before... before us. He used to, well, I mean, you know.'

'I do know.'

Aurelle didn't say anything. She ran her fingers over the knuckles of Diana's right hand. She felt the small callus caused by gripping a pencil for long periods.

'He did it for a lot of reasons,' Diana continued. 'Because I was an easy target. Because people laughed. Because he was competitive and jealous of anyone else getting any glory. Because everything he said was sort of true: I am too tall, too weird, too awkward. He was repulsed by me and hated having to share any space with me. He needed me to be weak, but he hated me for it as well. He was the golden child and he needed to keep it that way.' She swallowed and cleared her throat. 'And now, my parents only see him when they look at me.' She gripped Aurelle's hand tightly. 'But none of that matters anymore. I have you.'

‘Yes,’ said Aurelle, and they lay back together and breathed deep the morning air, each smiling with relief.

The remainder of the summer opened up for them like a Meyer lemon: sweet, without the expected bitterness. Aurelle felt like she’d been rescued from a terrible fate and this renewed joie de vivre meant that, almost overnight, she got over what she now saw as a silly infatuation with Tim. When he finally showed up at the house again, she brushed him off while painting her toenails.

‘Oh, hey,’ she said, not looking up. ‘Diana, pass me the Q-Tips?’ Dabbing at the blood-red marks on her pale skin. Whether he was hurt or relieved, she didn’t know or care. Diana raised her eyebrows at him and he blushed, knowing this was Keith’s sister, mumbling an apology as he faded into the backdrop of extras who hung around the house.

‘It’s so much happier here,’ Diana had once said, looking around at the hive of activity that was Aurelle’s home.

‘Yeah, I guess that’s true.’ Aurelle followed Diana’s gaze through the screen door into the huge kitchen, where her mom was pacing while on the phone, her laugh spilling out into the garden.

Diana stayed over at the house so often that she basically lived there. Marianne chalked it up to grief and doted on Diana, checking in with her regularly, asking how she was feeling, hugging her tightly. All things that Aurelle assumed Diana would find annoying, and was surprised to see her friend indulge her mother in. Sometimes, Diana spent alone time with Marianne, as many of the young people who came through the house had done over the years. *I understand teenagers*, Marianne had claimed, both publicly and privately. Aurelle felt sympathy for her friend so was glad that she was getting some love, even if it was just standard Taylor kindness.

Occasionally, they would go over to Diana’s to get clothes or tapes or books. Diana had kept up the practice of reading aloud to Aurelle even after her recovery, and Aurelle loved it, often closing her eyes to better hear the beautiful sound of her friend’s deep voice. So, when Diana had things in her room that they wanted, the girls made the trip over the lawn to the Martins’. Mr Martin was sometimes there, writing a letter at a table, or making food in the kitchen, or distracted by some other solemn and quiet activity. Mrs Martin was always known to be ‘resting.’ She had retired to her room to be in grief not long after Keith’s death, and rarely emerged. When she did, she

had the haunted look of someone unsure of the time of day. They were older than Aurelle's parents, seeming to have aged rapidly, something that could have been associated with their recent tragedy, but, no – they had always seemed that way. Aurelle thought of her own parents: their almost suffocating need to relate to their children, their devotion to success in work and family, their commitment to staying young. The entire MT brand was based on youthful joy. They were high achievers in every capacity, never seeming to tire or fail. Beautiful, young, successful. Looking at Diana's parents, it occurred to her that not everyone shared that need, had that drive. She understood why Diana found it depressing at her own house, but sensed that, beyond the grief, there was something that had been there before, a kind of calm normalcy that Aurelle envied and craved. She wished not for the first time that she'd befriended Diana earlier.

'Let's go,' Diana would say, a bag of items over her shoulder. 'Bye, Dad.'

Mr Martin would look up from whatever he was doing. 'Bye, girls. Thank your parents for us, Aurelle.'

'Yes, I will,' Aurelle would reply, resisting the urge to add *Sir*.

Diana seemed to lighten, straighten, when she crossed the lawns between the houses, returning to the Taylors'. Her eyes would brighten, and Aurelle would see her own home through her friend's eyes. It was a happy place, she thought, ignoring her own irritation with her family, with everyone's obsession with them. So what if the media got only some of the story? It was partly true, even if it was exaggerated. Even Aurelle wasn't sure what was authentic and what was 'the brand.' Her mother had built an empire and a family, and both were wildly successful. Everyone seemed to love them, including strangers. There was a glow of glamour about the Marianne Taylor family, always had been. She was lucky. She knew.

Aurelle sometimes thought of Mrs Martin, with her greying hair that fell in a shroud around her face, and knew that Diana's mom would never stay up gossiping and advising the boys and girls from their school the way hers did. She partly envied Diana her regular family, but felt terrible for this, knowing they had been torn apart by death.

Keith. It was strange in a way, that one Martin had replaced another, that there was never a time when both had been present at the Taylors' house. When Aurelle thought about the Diana she had observed in the hallways and classrooms of their school, she concluded that this was, indeed, the

same person Diana was now. Unlike Keith, who was the life of the party, bullish and boorish, Diana had a grace that had always risen above the fray. Aurelle knew that Diana was skilled in many things, both artistic and athletic, but she never bragged or boasted; it was as though she'd been slowly eclipsing Keith until now, here.

Aurelle hadn't realized she needed the quietude Diana offered. Their friendship had shown her that the constant fluttering in her chest – the worried excitement and perpetual jitters that marked her relationship with Tim, but also her feelings even before – could be quelled. The Taylor home was a revolving door of parties and dinners, with a gossip mill driven by the numerous kids who frequented the house, but Aurelle now saw the beauty in not caring about any of it. She felt like she'd come through the other side of something and was a new person. She sometimes looked over at Diana, quietly reading or sketching, or in the moments before she woke when she slept over, tangled in the sheets of Aurelle's massive bed, and felt like she was seeing the flipside of her own body, her other self.

Later, there was a band called Me, Mom & Morgentaler, and Aurelle thought it was a stupid name. She didn't recall seeing any mothers at the Morgentaler clinic. Her own mother's life was so carefully controlled: a curated perfection. She hadn't planned for something like this. If Aurelle had told her, Marianne would have stopped everything to help, and the thought of being the sole recipient of her mother's attention made her uncomfortable. She preferred to move around the periphery of Marianne's universe, as much as Marianne loved to pull her to the center. She was just so much: so much love and affection and ambition and enthusiasm. Aurelle found it exhausting. *And here's my beautiful daughter!* Marianne would say during some interview or photo shoot, calling Aurelle over from the sidelines and insisting she be included, featured. She knew she played an important role in the MT brand: youth and beauty personified. She couldn't bear the thought of interrupting the company trajectory because of some stupid mistake; for a love that she now saw as childish. Marianne would have wanted to know who it was and, because she couldn't refuse her mother, Aurelle would have ended up telling her, and the whole thing would have suddenly become so much more real. Diana, on the other hand, was the model of restraint. She could help Aurelle paper over that whole part of

her life like it was just a bad dream.

When she thought back on the procedure, her mind flashed through pictures, moments, and her heart quickened even in the recollection. Her one prevailing memory was that of a calm kindness. The receptionist, the doctor, Diana. Three people who led her through, saved her. They were gentle, honest, steady.

A year later, there was a firebombing in the middle of the night. When Aurelle found out, when she saw the morning edition of the paper on the kitchen table with the front-page photo of the firefighters hosing down the building's façade, her body froze, her hand covered her mouth in involuntary shock. Her stomach turned.

'Yeah, some nutter tried to blow up the abortion clinic,' said Matt, seeing her face. He scooped a spoonful of cereal into his mouth, dribbling milk down his chin. He was home for the summer after his first year at university. He had gained the 'Freshman 15' and was larger, more of a man than he had been. So much had changed. So little. Aurelle nodded, her eyes darting to him, then back to the photo.

'Was anyone hurt?' she asked quietly. The doctors, the nurses who had been so steadfast – this was their place of work. All those women, all of those girls like her who needed that place. Someone like Aurelle could have had an appointment for today, and now what would she do?

'I dunno. Didn't read it.' Matt was scanning the sports section, his attention diverted. Aurelle felt her fingers take the page from the table, and she became lost in the story, the photos of the destruction.

No one was hurt. The building, though, was demolished beyond repair, taking with it Aurelle's experience. It truly was like it had never happened.

Later, in her room, Aurelle told Diana. She had started their friendship by telling her the biggest thing, the smallest thing, and now Diana was the person to whom she told everything. Diana nodded. She knew, of course. She had probably read the paper while sipping bitter black coffee at her house before coming directly to the Taylors'.

'I hope they catch and kill that fucker,' Diana said coldly, her eyes flashing. Aurelle's heart beat fast, pleased with the knowledge that she had someone so fearsome in her corner.

IN ADDITION TO THE COURSES at RBU, which were offered in a surprising range given the size of the faculty and student body, there was a lively afterhours world, even for those who didn't partake in the parties and raves. Literature readings, one-act plays, sailing regattas and stargazing. The boundaries between professors and students blurred after dark, many professors having events at their cabins that ran late into the night, students sprawled out on plaid chesterfields by morning. It was, in some ways, one long cottage weekend that eventually became a life.

Aurette's English Lit professor invited the class to an evening salon at his cabin.

'I have a monthly Culture Club there with some other faculty and friends. We bring an idea or a thing to talk about: music, films, books, you know, and we explain why we like them as everyone gets drunk and overheated.' The students laughed. 'Anyway,' he continued. 'You are all welcome. Please come. Otherwise I'll have to spend another evening listening to why I should be reading Ayn Rand courtesy of Dr Horton from Geography.'

Aurette made note of the address of the cabin, jotted down on the blackboard. She hadn't made any friends in her classes yet, but students were friendly to her in the way of people who feel like it is too late to ask your name but recognize that you have a shared experience. It manifested itself in eye-rolling and smiling about the readings, or apologizing if one's knapsack bumped another's chair when sitting down.

'Are you going to go?' a girl named Maha asked her as they left the building together.

'I think so... Maybe?'

'You should come. I hear they're really fun,' Maha said, then waved as she headed off to her next class.

Aurette stopped by the Den that night, long after other art students had left, and told Diana about it.

'I don't think I'll go,' she said, scuffing her feet like a child.

'You should,' Diana told her. 'I'll try and come by when I'm done and then we can go out together.' She returned to her easel.

Aurette used the bathroom in the Den and reapplied her red lipstick: her

armour, her mask. She called *goodbye* through the studios to Diana as she left, letting the large wooden doors thump closed behind her.

Diana was not the only person working in the studio late. A handful of other students were at their easels, adhering to the setup that they had established in the first week. A record was playing in the corner. Kim, Noah and a few others were sharing a joint on the Den's wooden front steps, and the funky smell wafted pleasantly inside. Diana was working on a painted nude study from Grace's class earlier in the day. She had chosen to focus on the face of the model, Jeanette, detailing the sharp angles of her thin features, her resigned countenance. Grace herself was across the room speaking to Simon, a tall, bearded artist who always wore a large parka in the style of Liam Gallagher from Oasis. Diana heard pieces of their conversation.

'You are trying to rein yourself in, I can tell,' Grace was saying to him. 'Don't. Do the opposite.' Diana didn't catch Simon's murmured response. She had seen his work, and he was talented in a different way to Diana – more modern, adding what she viewed as affectations in the form of scrawled words and childlike scratches – as though he was channeling Basquiat.

Grace soon made her way over to Diana. She was carrying a bottle of wine and a small sleeve of cups. Diana laughed as Grace offered her a cup and poured her some wine.

'Now, let's talk about this.' She gestured at Diana's painting. 'You are a talented portraitist. Where did you learn this?'

Diana took a sip, shivering involuntarily at the taste as it hit her mouth. 'I do a lot of drawing studies.' She thought of all the drawings of Aurelle and other members of the Taylor family in her sketchbook – drawings she'd done from a distance for years, then close-up more recently. 'Mostly of my roommate... my friend.' Neither word suited Aurelle. Diana stood still as Grace studied the painting.

'The trick,' she said, 'to achieving portraits that rise above the rest is peeling back, showing something hidden that, perhaps, the subject herself is hiding.' She took a drink. 'People make the mistake of thinking that portraits ought to be flattering. Those aren't portraits – they are no different from Sears photos. No, done properly, the portrait should unsettle – both the subject and the viewer. Many a portrait artist has been on the receiving end

of a hurt subject. Think Churchill, for example. It shouldn't be a vanity project.' She nodded at the face of Jeanette, rendered in careful strokes. 'You are getting somewhere here. You're not there yet.' She looked at Diana, who felt stung but galvanized, and nodded. 'Keep working.' She raised her cup and walked off, humming to herself. Diana returned to the painting, reassessing. Ready to work.

Aurette stuffed her hands in her pockets and followed her professor's directions to his cabin. It was on the lakefront some way from the campus proper, but still close enough that she was there sooner than she'd expected. She knocked, and heard voices call for her to come in. She tentatively opened the screen door, then a larger one behind, and went inside.

The room was full already. She recognized other students who stood about chatting, drinking, laughing. Aurette accepted a glass of wine and drank it quickly, feeling more relaxed, brave enough to join conversations. She soon found herself laughing along with her peers about things that didn't matter at all, and felt good because of that. People arrived in a steady stream, so many that no one knocked, and the door was propped open to relieve the cabin of the heat of the fire. The warm glow cast a comforting light around the room and Aurette was pleased, happily but not messily tipsy. Eventually, her professor called his guests to order and began the business of going round, asking people to introduce the room to 'some cultural artifact that, at the risk of sounding completely insufferable, makes your heart beat faster.'

Aurette listened, aware of the clockwise rotation of the examples, the discussion picking up and leaving off and returning to the next person, as it got closer to her. She wasn't afraid, but aware, feeling her nervousness increasing a notch with every person who spoke. However, everyone was friendly, the beer and wine were a balm, and it was soon her turn.

'Hi,' she said, lifting a palm. 'I'm also a student. Thanks for having me.' She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as the professor smiled and raised his glass. 'Um. I guess, at the risk of sounding' – here, she realized she was copying what her professor had said earlier, but plowed on – 'cliché... I'd like to make a case for JD Salinger's Glass family. I know that there are the stories and the novel, and that they sort of reappear in different works, but looking at them altogether, as a family... I guess? I like the way that they

talk, or I guess the way the author does, about being lonely in a family. I mean, they are all close, as siblings, but they are also all in solitary pain.' There was nodding around the room. 'I'd never read anything before I read his writing that took on loneliness like that...' She finished lamely, but soon someone picked up on her lost thread and agreed. They mentioned *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which Aurelle also loved and felt she could discuss, and someone else commented on how they felt Salinger was unfairly dismissed simply because he'd been so widely read. The conversation had its own legs and moved from Aurelle, and she relaxed in her chair, relieved and pleased, taking her turn at nodding and agreeing, laughing and accepting a refilled glass.

As the night wore on, she felt a drunken haze over everything, but she was not completely at ease. She kept looking at the door, hoping to see Diana come through, but she never came. Eventually Aurelle left, stumbling towards the Den, where she found Diana, of course, who rowed them both across the lake in the canoe, Aurelle's fingers skimming the surface of the water.

THE THING DIANA SAID TO Aurelle after the abortion, the thing she'd never told anyone, was this:

'I hated him. I wished he would die.'

'Who?' said Aurelle.

'Keith. My brother. I hated him. I—' She stopped short.

Aurelle's pretty eyes blinked, once, twice, and she listened. She already knew this, on some level. How could Diana not have, given how he'd treated her?

'Well, you probably heard him say things about me. I know he did. He... he wasn't kind.' He was, in fact, relentlessly cruel and sadistic, pushing her into a box of loneliness that she'd eventually turned into stoicism. Aurelle nodded, ashamed again that she had never jumped to Diana's defense.

'Anyway,' Diana continued. 'We had a fight that morning, and he left, and went down to the dock. I followed him. And... I saw it happen. I saw him die.' She swallowed, remembering the cocky way he'd walked down to the water as though it was his alone, as though the world was his. How she had cursed him, wished he was dead. She remembered her rage like a sweet, sharp pain – like a shot, a drug. She felt her breath quicken at the memory.

'Oh, Diana,' Aurelle said quietly, and squeezed her friend's hand. 'I'm sure he knows, wherever he is, that you didn't really hate him.'

Diana furrowed her brow at Aurelle's kindness, and thought, *But I did*. She didn't say anything else, though. It was a release, telling Aurelle, even if her friend felt it was untrue on some level. She could allow her hatred to mutate, strengthen her, as it had when he was alive. She never brought him up again, and if Aurelle ever asked, she changed the subject. They were done with that now. Unburdened. Her life was different, and she was glad for it. She pushed away thoughts of blinding fury, her deep hatred, his blood in the lake and the sun behind them, casting a long shadow over both of them. She was here now, in the bosom of the Taylor family, finally. Aurelle was her best friend, and her old life, her next-door life, felt like a distant memory. She had always wanted a sister, to *be* a Taylor daughter; now, she was. An honorary Taylor. Of this, she had no doubt.

After she broke her arm, Diana began to keep a book. A scrapbook, kind of; a sketchbook, in a way. She cut out pictures from magazines of people and things that inspired her, and pasted them alongside her own drawings and observations she made from her window. Much of the book was populated with Marianne Taylor imagery. There was no shortage of material out there: profiles, ads, photos and articles on the company, the merchandise, the woman herself. Her handbags were described as *cheerful, happy, arm-candy, bright, fun, zippy, whimsical*. They challenged traditional form and function, they were silly and over-the-top. Then Marianne started a line of sneakers, and it seemed like her imagination exploded with the new opportunities to express herself. Sequins, beads, ribbons, pins, all the colours of the rainbow. Thick soles and fat laces and everything you didn't think you wanted or needed in a shoe. MT. The logo was on sky-high billboards and just those two letters were synonymous with youth, with fun, and then with partying, drugs. If clothes could chew bubble gum, blow huge pink bubbles, this was the brand to do it. The ads looked like the visions of Ecstasy itself. Marianne worked with famous skateboarders, DJs and graffiti artists. Diana's book was full of collages made from MT designs.

For Christmas in 1992, she asked for a pair of the sneakers, and her mother had chided her for her choice but given them. They were gorgeous, stark white with lemon yellow soles and lemons and limes printed on the toes and fat laces. She cherished them. But, in the end, she couldn't get up the nerve to wear them. She froze with indecision on how to pair them with anything she owned. Keith laughed and said she'd never be able to pull those off, not with her huge feet. She wore them once, to school, with her uniform. She was startled by how much attention she received, just from her feet alone. Kids who had never spoken to her – the Jennifers, the Laura-Leighs, the Jasons and Todds – stopped her after class to ask about them, to compliment her. It was overwhelming. She kept them in her closet after that, returning to her penny loafers.

High school was tolerable. Diana had some acquaintances, but she never really gelled with anyone. She was in some classes with Aurelle; she watched her from a distance. By then, Aurelle had grown into her own beauty and looked startlingly like her mother. Her hair was lighter, and she had more freckles, but it was eerie how much Aurelle resembled Marianne. Same dark eyes, same full lips. The brothers didn't hold Diana's interest the

way that Marianne and Aurelle did. Matt, James and Mike looked more like their dad, and they were sunny and sweet but faded into the scenery. She envied them, but wasn't interested – especially not in Matt, with whom Keith was closest. Diana rolled her eyes at stories about all the rowing guys, their names – Matt, Tim, Jeff – blending into one another like the water they spent so much time in.

Diana had joined the swim team in spite of Keith's jibes and insults. He'd insisted that she'd probably sink, winking while he said it, giving their mom a kiss and making her blush. Diana ignored him and discovered that she loved swimming. The early morning practices, riding in her father's car in the dark silence; it all appealed to her. She loved the punishing cold water, the mindless momentum and the personal challenges. Sounds echoed against the walls of the pool but were shut out by the quiet of the water. And her body was, in fact, made for swimming. She developed a muscular back and shoulders, strong legs that pushed her long body far ahead of anyone else. She began winning. She got a taste for ambition, competition. Snapping her swim cap over her hair, zeroing in on her goal, blocking everything else out. She was, it turned out, very good at that.

At night, her body clean but smelling faintly of chlorine, she would comfort herself with her solitude. Reading books, sketching, making notes, little observations and collages. She would ruminate over the house next door, the people there. It was Marianne and Aurelle who caught Diana's eye, always. And, over the years, she had gathered, both incidentally and intentionally, so much knowledge about them. A lifetime's worth. Marianne, Diana knew, had a studio in the house as well as one up north, not far from the Martin cottage. Diana learned that she also had work spaces in her offices, both in Toronto and New York, but that she liked having one at home so she could work whenever inspiration struck – and because she enjoyed working in the midst of the noise and hubbub of a house full of teenagers. Diana had seen Marianne outside, of course, and glimpsed her through windows, but the fact remained that, despite her near-infatuation with the family, she only knew as much as any fan of Marianne Taylor, as any dimwit in her school wearing the shoes and carrying the handbags.

Keith, meanwhile, dropped details like candy wrappers upon returning from his visits next door. Between chugging juice from the carton in the

fridge, he would say, ‘You should see that place. They’ve got all this crazy art all over the house.’

‘Like what? What do you mean?’

He’d shrug. ‘I dunno. Like huge paintings and stuff. Matt says that Ma Taylor collects them.’

“‘Ma Taylor?’” she’d repeat in disbelief.

Another time, he told Diana that there was a tall glass case filled with MT signature pieces, all named after the Taylor children. ‘She designed these wicked high tops for Matt,’ he said. ‘And, like, these ballet shoe things for Aurelle.’ He paused, looking at Diana, then said, ‘Hey, is she seeing anyone?’

‘Who?’

‘*Aurelle*, Dummy. You know. She’s in your grade, isn’t she?’

‘Oh. Yeah,’ Diana said. ‘I don’t know. Why?’

Keith shrugged. ‘She’s cute.’ He seemed to consider something, then said, ‘Tim seems to be getting kinda cozy with her. I wonder if Matt knows.’

Diana rolled her eyes. ‘Anyway. Have you seen Mrs Taylor’s – Marianne’s – studio?’

‘Nah.’ He squinted his small, mean eyes at her suspiciously. ‘Why? Are you in love with her?’

‘Shut up.’

‘I’ve seen your little diary, you know.’

Diana reddened, shocked. ‘What? Why are you looking at my stuff?’ She felt a hot fury in her chest.

Keith raised his eyebrows and smirked. ‘I wanted to make sure you weren’t casting spells or something. You’re so weird, hiding in here all the time.’ He started to leave the kitchen, then stopped to pop some cashews in his mouth from a crystal bowl on the counter. ‘But now I know I was right,’ he pointed a finger, smiling. ‘You’ve just got a lesbo obsession with Marianne *and* Aurelle. Maybe I’ll just snap up that cutie to piss you off.’ He cackled, tipping his head back.

Diana’s face twisted in her effort to stop herself from crying. Rage surged inside her. Before she could stop herself, she grabbed a glass measuring cup from the drying rack and launched it at Keith. He threw up his arm and knocked it away. It hit the doorway and then the floor with a tremendous crash, breaking in two.

‘What the hell?’ He yelled at her, and she heard her mother coming down the stairs, calling out to them.

‘What’s going on?’ their mother demanded, staring aghast at her two children. Keith pointed at Diana.

‘She’s a psycho,’ he declared. He threw his arms up and stormed away to his room.

Diana had already regained her composure, her heart rate slowing, her breath regulating. *Calm. Control.* She hated that she had a temper, that something flared hot and unpredictable within her. She knelt down and picked up the two broken pieces of the cup.

‘Sorry, Mom,’ she said, her head turned away. ‘I tossed it to him and he missed.’ She looked at her mother’s feet, painted toes pushing at her nylons like muzzled dogs. ‘I should have thought before I acted.’

THE MARTINS CALLED IT ‘THE cottage,’ but it was a multimillion-dollar house, built to blend with the natural landscape while also being luxurious and efficient in its design. It was outfitted with the best kitchen appliances, enormous windows offering a view of the lake, huge bedrooms and a wraparound upper deck. The colouring and furnishings were tasteful greys and soft blues; the house felt like a water-worn pebble or piece of driftwood. Helen and Edward Martin had had it built before the children were born, but it was regularly updated and people often wondered if it was new. When asked, they smiled patiently. *It’s been in our family for years,* they’d reply, which was code for something to do with old money and taste, only perceivable to those they wanted to impress.

Diana learned to skate on the frozen lake. As she got older, she pushed herself to skate from end to end, the northern air whipping against her cheeks. She craved the expanse of water the cottage offered, and wanted to be there as often as possible. The lake was a friend – sometimes her only friend – and so she tolerated Keith in order to be there.

Keith had his driver’s license, but, more importantly, he had a car. Their parents had gifted him a beautiful Jaguar in British Racing Green when he’d turned sixteen. *For our pride and joy.* A bow on the roof like in a movie. Diana had watched his white straight teeth when he’d grinned like a wolf with pleasure, even though he’d expected exactly this and would have been shocked had he not received it. She knew she would get the same soon. *We are spoiled,* Diana reflected often, matter-of-factly. She knew this, and it filled her with a mixture of self-loathing and self-confidence, smugness and humility, the emotions bouncing back on one another in an endless loop that only the wealthy have the privilege of ignoring.

They went skiing in Switzerland; they summered up north at the cottage in Muskoka; they went to private schools; they never worried about money. Diana knew this, and watched how her brother grew, over the years, into a show-off, a braggart, a privileged asshole who expected the world and got it. But then, so did she. She was well-mannered, well-dressed, refined. Anything she wanted, they gave her. She made herself feel better by not asking for much, not often. *But if I wanted it, I’d have it,* she knew. At least

she wasn't blind to their life, not in the way Keith was. His whole body opened like a hungry mouth, taking in every offer, every opportunity, his burly figure opening its arms to sweep it all into its maw. *More more more.* She once overheard one of his rowing buddies talking about how Keith couldn't be the target at a Rowing Team Roast dinner, because 'Keith roasts life!' *Take take take.* He practically lived at the Taylors, eating their food, ogling their daughter, shaking hands with Mr Taylor and bullshitting Marianne with his phony appreciation of art and design. Diana saw all of this, the colossal kiss-ass he was, and what she didn't see, she imagined. She failed to understand how no one else noticed his uncanny ability to grab everything, even the things that shouldn't have been his to take.

She once asked her mother, who prized etiquette above most things, why it didn't bother her that Keith was so brashly opportunistic, knowing any version of this on her own part would provoke deep disapproval. *Wasn't it a bit tacky?*

'He's industrious, dear,' her mother had said, putting a hand on her arm, smiling almost pityingly. *Don't you feel sorry for me,* Diana thought, lifting her chin. *Don't you ever feel sorry for me.*

Keith went up to the cottage often. Diana sometimes went along if there was room in his car, gritting her teeth against his barrage of teasing and bravado so that she could be alone on the lake at the end of it. Diana couldn't get to the cottage alone and her parents seldom went, so they told Keith he had to drive her when he went up on weekends. He agreed reluctantly, complaining that she'd *better not get in the way,* as if she would ever want to. He always brought friends so Diana would have to squeeze up against the door in the backseat, squashed and ignored by older kids who laughed and flirted loudly, leaning into the front seat as they drove several hours up north, sometimes getting stuck in standstill traffic on the 400, a highway that transported many people from southern Ontario to their summer cottages on the weekends. Diana would roll her window down, look at the passengers in the cars beside her in the traffic jam: kayaks on the roof, bikes on the back, children looking hot and bored. Diana would hold her stare until they looked away, and it gave her a fleeting rush of satisfaction.

Diana hated Keith. This bald fact, which she later shared with Aurelle, came as a surprise to her at first, but then she leaned into it. Owned it. Later,

she wondered if it had been a waste, the amount of energy she'd put into hating someone who would disappear from her life altogether, but she knew that it made her who she was, who she became. She tended to her anger like it was a pet: stroking it, feeding it, watching it grow a glossy coat and gleaming teeth. She tried to keep it caged, didn't want him to see it, because when she let it out, it became an uncontrollable thing. And Diana was nothing if not controlled.

She hated the way he'd assumed a spot in the Taylor family that he didn't deserve and hadn't earned. She knew that others couldn't see the difference between the parties at the Taylors' and those at the homes of all the other kids in that circle; maybe these gatherings were all just fun and loud and full of blonde hair and glossy lips and perky tits and glamorous, drunken debauchery. But Diana knew. The Taylor house was full of love and art and talent. It was different. It was *real*. It was the beautiful creation of the matriarch of heart and wonder, Marianne Taylor. To fail to appreciate that felt like sacrilege.

Sometimes Matt, Aurelle's brother, joined them up north. The Taylors had their own cottage – a newer, smaller one, some way away from theirs, along the lake. Diana knew from what she overheard from Matt that Marianne used it as a studio to work, to 'get away' and 'connect,' and that the rest of the family were expected to leave her and respect her need for quiet. The Martin cottage, at least while Keith and his friends were there, was never quiet. Music blared from a sound system wired throughout the house, there were coolers and fridges topped up with beer, the fire pit down by the lake looked like the aftermath of a frat party the morning after each night spent there. Diana often wondered why she joined them, but satisfied herself that she was adding observations about her brother to her catalogue of offences. He had no respect for property, for the neighbours, for women even. She watched the way he grabbed and touched the girls who came up with them, and their hands swatting him away, their eyes rolling. *You love it*, he'd say. *You love me*. He refilled their drinks, lured them into his room, losing interest in them by the next morning, when everyone was a paler, plainer version of themselves than the day before. When regret wafted off of them like stale booze.

One spring morning, Diana sat out on the upper deck, watching the lake, staring across at the college. Despite the small uproar when Rocky Barrens

University had reopened, the cottagers and the students seemed to have found a begrudging respect, a rhythm even. The college claimed to select students who were well-suited not only for studying, but for the environs, the surroundings, and through this they'd found a common ground with the people who cottaged there. *The RBU student*, she'd read on a pamphlet she'd seen at the general store in town, *is at one with nature, is keen to learn not only their subject matter, but about their place in the natural world.* Diana watched the rowers glide across the lake, knowing her brother would go to school there, find pride of place on the rowing team, win awards for the university, all while caring nothing for the natural world except for what he saw as the natural order. She pictured him holding an oar over his head, his muscular arms tensed for maximum attractiveness. She sipped her coffee.

The screen door opened and one of the girls who had come up with them walked out. Claire, her name was. She had stringy hair and large eyes. Diana had noticed how she often stood with her toes pointed inward. She had small, crooked teeth and covered her mouth when she laughed. All of this, but she was pretty in a bland way, and had perfected a kind of cute sexiness that was currency for Keith and his friends. Keith called her *Baby Spice*, and it wasn't an insult.

'Hey, Diane,' she said, her voice husky with her hangover.

'-A.'

'What?' Claire said, sitting down beside her.

'Dian-A. You said Diane.'

Claire raised her eyebrows and pulled out a cigarette. She put it between her lips and clicked a lighter, mumbling, 'Keith said it was Diane.'

'It's not.'

The girl closed her eyes and exhaled. 'Gotcha. Dian-AH. Loud and clear.'

The fact that Claire didn't know Diana's name despite going to her school, dating her brother and riding up to the cottage with her didn't surprise her. She felt goaded, momentarily, into calling her *Clara* and claiming, rightfully, that the girls who dated Keith were largely interchangeable, that it was almost as though they could stand in for one another. Maybe Claire was an understudy for, say, Ashley, or Jenna. But she looked out over the lake, squinted her eyes at the rising sun and said nothing. Sometimes saying nothing says more, her mother had taught her. That was the WASP way,

after all.

They sat in silence, the tension thrumming between them, until Claire stubbed out her cigarette and went inside. *Your sister's a bitch*, Diana heard her say to Keith later, who laughed and replied, *Yeah, just ignore her, she's probably jealous of you.*

But he was wrong. It wasn't the Claires and the Jennas and the Ashleys she was jealous of.

THE WINTER OF 1995 DESCENDED on Rocky Barrens University. The college in the woods was covered in snow. The first creak of an avalanche before everything tumbled down.

Aurette hadn't fully appreciated how different the season was up north compared to the comfortable experience of winter in the city, where snowplows cleared the streets before they woke and school was rarely closed because of the snowfall. Having not often been north in the winter, she had never seen this much snow. Rocky Barrens was a Christmas card of picturesque white-topped cabins and a glass-like frozen lake. However, beneath this quaint appearance was a fierce cold, a threatening ice, a kind of seasonal treachery.

Aurette's parents had shopped for her in the summer, when it seemed like winter was still a faraway idea, and had outfitted her with a parka, long underwear, lined boots and hats. Diana already had hers at the cottage, accustomed as she was to the winters here. Aurette had rolled her eyes and said it was overkill, but soon, and suddenly, she was frantically rooting through her closet to find her warmest clothes, steeling herself against bitter winds and sharp, icy snow pellets when moving between classes. Windows were dappled with stars of frozen snowflakes, and the sound of shovels scraping pathways was constant. The hallways of the residences stunk of wet boots and wool and it took expedition-like preparations to get to parties at other houses, with students usually opting to stay in and get drunk in their rooms. Snow drifted up against building entrances and walkways, shovels stayed propped against doorways.

One particularly cold afternoon, a girl named Rachel from Aurette's Can Lit class called out to everyone as they were gathering their bags after class.

'Um, hey guys,' she said brightly, her voice lifting. Aurette noticed that her cheeks had gone red. This made Aurette like her and want to tell everyone to listen, but she didn't, and they did anyway. People paused in the act of putting binders in knapsacks.

Rachel continued. 'We're accepting submissions for the current edition of *Badlands*, um, a zine I edit here at RBU, so... If any of you have poetry or stories or art or anything? Come talk to me. We do a launch party, with a

reading at Taxx. So everyone should come to that, too.’ She tucked a hair behind her ear and ducked her head, gathering her stuff as everyone filed out.

‘Hey,’ Aurelle caught up with her in the hallway. The floor was damp with melted snow, and a blast of cold air came in through the large oak doors as people came and went. ‘Hi,’ she repeated, when Rachel stopped and smiled at her. ‘Um. I was wondering if I could, like, submit a poem for *Badlands*?’

This was a risk, but she wanted to try. Seeing Diana so immersed in her passion made Aurelle want to experience some of that feeling, the satisfaction of making and putting things out in the world. She did write poems, little graspings and whispers of words in a notebook that had never been seen by anyone but Diana. She swallowed now, wondering if she was making a mistake.

‘Sure! That’s awesome,’ Rachel said. ‘I’m sorry; I don’t know your name.’ She made a little wave, ‘I’m Rachel. Oh – I guess I already said that.’ She laughed, blushing again.

‘Oh, that’s OK. I’m–’ Aurelle paused. She’d managed to avoid being noticed for the most part, even in some of her classes. She’d enjoyed being unknown so far. Maybe this girl didn’t know her family, maybe she wouldn’t care. But what if she did, and what if she accepted the poem because of Aurelle’s name? ‘I’m Diana,’ she said, her voice faltering.

‘Cool. Well, why don’t you just drop off what you’d like us to consider?’ She gave Aurelle her details and they left the building together, waving as they went separate ways at a fork in the road where the snow had been packed down by several boots.

Aurelle agonized at the thought of her writing being considered. She assumed she wasn’t very good. Her poetry was surely too plain, not enough like the prose they sometimes read in class, for instance. She liked to write about everyday things. The way things looked or felt. Regular things. Diana had once shown her paintings by Mary Pratt. They were so simple – leftovers wrapped in foil, eggs in a carton – but they were moving, too, glimmering in their relatability. Aurelle had always appreciated the regular amidst a life of glamour and flash. She sighed now to herself. Maybe the poems were boring. She didn’t know, really. She would have to write something fresh. And as for using Diana’s name, she told herself that her friend would understand, because Diana loved her and would know why

she wanted to be someone else, just for this.

Diana had been spending a lot of time at the Den. Aurelle was alone in the cottage that night. She turned most of the lights off and got under the covers of her bed with her notebook. She wrote some things down, scratched them out again, critiquing her handwriting, the words themselves. Embarrassed of her attempts at creativity. Why did she say she wanted to do this? She tried again. Wrote a few pieces of prose on different pages. She wondered if they were too precious, too pretentious, trying too hard, and then this anxiety flipped on itself and they were too simple, not trying hard enough. She wrote about the feeling of a stranger's body, someone's, anyone's, beside her. There had been a few, guys and girls. The feeling. The foreignness, the intimacy, and how those two sensations could coexist. Knowing and not knowing. Her mind moved beyond the person, and she described her bedside table, the dust, the water glass. Imperfect moments, imperfect poems. There were a number of old, passion-filled and terrible notes in the book about Tim from what seemed like long ago; notes about someone she'd thought she'd loved. Now, looking at her infatuated ramblings, she felt nothing for him. She hadn't known what love was then, had fantasized a relationship that hadn't been real, had only been sex. She noticed a roach and a lighter on the table, and fit it between her front teeth, lighting it, inhaling, looking up at the ceiling light, which was tasteful and stylish. She lay her head back and exhaled. She relaxed. Wrote a few more things down about how sometimes she worried she might disappear, fade away, her body breaking into particles. How she both loved and feared the sensation. The words didn't seem so bad anymore. Maybe they were good, true.

She rolled over on her side and looked at her closet. A bunch of her mother's designs were hanging there, things she'd brought when she'd helped Aurelle and Diana move in. *Give them to your friends if you don't want them; I'm sure that'll turn some heads.* Aurelle's stomach had tightened at the thought of handing out MT clothes to make friends. Her mother was so driven, but had no idea how Aurelle might feel about anything. She hated to turn heads. Diana had unpacked the clothes lovingly, hanging them in Aurelle's closet where they'd been since early September. She knew it was true that many people would want access to them, and, even more so, the shoes lined up below them on the floor. The iconic MT

on the heels stared out at her now. She ground the roach into a dish on her bedside table and rolled onto her back again, holding her book above her, reading the poems to choose which one she should send.

In the end, Rachel had liked the shortest one, and Aurelle immediately suspected it was because it caused the least embarrassment and Rachel pitied her. But still, a small part of her was proud. It was called 'Particle' and, in the issue of *Badlands*, there was a black and white photo of dust in the sunlight alongside the poem. *By Diana M.*

'I told them my name was Diana,' Aurelle said in an offhand way, when she'd handed the issue to her friend over dinner a couple of weeks later.

Diana raised her eyebrows in question.

'I just thought... I dunno. I don't know why I did it, OK? I just didn't want my name in the magazine. My name has been in so many magazines, you know—'

Diana put a hand on hers and looked at her levelly, stopping her mid-sentence. 'Aurelle. It's OK.'

'I don't want to see my name...' her voice faltering a little at the end. It sounded stupid. Like she thought she was royalty or something.

Diana nodded, watching her.

Aurelle said, 'Sorry. I'm sorry. It was stupid.'

'Not at all.' Diana flipped through the magazine and stopped at the poem. Aurelle watched her while she read it. She looked up when she was done, tossing the magazine on the table between them. There was no reason to look at the rest of the submissions.

'It's good,' she declared. 'Very good.'

She smiled then, and Aurelle felt a rush of relief and reassurance. Diana often made declarations that were less opinion and more fact; it was intimidating and intoxicating. To hear her approve of Aurelle's work was a balm, a drug.

Diana changed the subject now, and Aurelle let her friend's voice wash over her as she lifted her wine glass and took a long drink, the red wine stark through the glass against her pale hand.

TAXX WAS A PUB ON campus committed to over-the-top cottage décor. The walls and tables were littered with mounted animals, from bears to rabbits to skunks, and the couches were covered in red and black plaid. It looked like a kind of hunting club of old, although it had only been open for a year or so. There was a small wooden stage for musicians and readings and other events, and high tables that servers weaved between with trays of pints, their arms held high. Aurelle had been to Taxx many times, but had never attended a *Badlands* launch. This time, however, as a writer, she walked in a different person. She was wracked with nerves. Diana followed her in the door, reaching down and running a hand over Aurelle's hair, a comfort and a reassurance. They found a table close to the stage, and Diana ordered two beers while Aurelle looked around for Rachel.

'Oh, there she is,' she said almost in a whisper, turning back to Diana, her face reddening.

Diana looked. 'Right, I've seen her around. She's coming to see you, so don't bother trying to hide.'

Rachel bustled over to them, her cheeks rosy, wearing a red corduroy jumpsuit that matched with everything else at Taxx.

'Hi!' she gasped at Aurelle. 'How are you?' She looked between the girls, smiling brightly, and stuck her hand out to Diana, who was just lighting her cigarette. 'I'm Rachel.'

Diana smiled around her cigarette and shook Rachel's hand firmly. 'Diana Martin,' she said, and Rachel let out a brief laugh, looking at Aurelle. 'This is Aurelle Taylor,' Diana continued, gesturing at her friend. Aurelle let out a small gasp, and her face reddened. She started to say something, but Diana lifted her hand just slightly to stop her. She continued: 'Aurelle wanted to use a bit of a pseudonym in print, and I offered my name. You should introduce Aurelle with her real name, of course.' She ashed her cigarette, waiting for Rachel to respond. Aurelle looked away, her lip trembling slightly.

'Oh! That's cool,' Rachel said, nodding. 'Well, nice to meet you, Diana, and—' She looked at Aurelle. 'Aurelle!'

Aurelle brushed her hair out of her eyes and recovered quickly. She

cleared her throat and babbled, ‘So? Are you excited? The issue is really great.’ She put her hand on her heart. ‘Thank you again, so much, for taking my little poem.’

‘Oh, our pleasure, it was great! Yeah, it really came together,’ Rachel replied, looking around the room as it filled up. She saw someone she knew and waved. ‘Tonight will be really fun. You’ll love it.’ She caught another student’s eye and mouthed something to them.

Diana was watching her, an amused look on her face. She took a drag of her cigarette and said, ‘Do you need to go?’

‘Hmm? Oh. Yeah, an editor’s work is never done! Talk to you guys after, OK?’ She squeezed Aurelle’s arm gently and rushed over to the stage to talk to the girl setting up the microphone.

Diana looked at Aurelle and smiled at her nervous expression. ‘Relax. You’ll do fine.’

Aurelle laughed and took a gulp of her beer.

It was a nice, cozy winter night. The place was full to the hilt. Aurelle noticed that every writer Rachel invited up to the stage received cheers from a crowd growing looser as the beers made their way around the room. There was a range of writers: from an older, local woman who owned a cottage nearby and was friends with some of the students, to a spoken word poet, a short story writer, a memoirist, and then...

‘Please help me welcome, reading her debut *Badlands* poem, “Particle” – Aurelle!’

Diana put her fingers in her mouth and whistled, then placed her cigarette between her teeth and clapped aggressively with her large hands. People followed suit, the whole room sounding like the best kind of gathering, the most supportive and in their cups. Aurelle covered her face with her hands like it was her birthday and laughed, making her way, blushing, to the stage. She tilted the microphone down to her height, and everyone grinned along with her, chuckling at the tiny beauty on the stage. The lights caught her fair hair, and her dark eyes sparkled as she looked out at everyone.

‘Um, hello,’ she breathed into the mic, and they erupted again.

As she was finishing her poem, Diana registered someone standing at her side. Grace McLaughlin smiled up at her and said, in a low voice, ‘So, there’s the friend who taught you to be an artist, yes?’

Aurette was done, and the crowd was applauding. Diana nodded, her eyes shining with pride for her girl. 'Yes, that's Aurette,' she said.

'Ah. Aurette Taylor?'

'Yes, that's right,' Diana said, as Aurette left the stage, smiling earnestly, tucking a hair behind her ear.

'There is something of a royal bearing about her, isn't there?' said Grace, staring at Aurette as she found her way to them through the crowd.

Grace stood by, watching closely, as Diana hugged her friend, told her how great she was. As Rachel introduced the next author, Aurette whispered a *hello* to Grace, and put out her hand. Grace shook it, firmly, still studying Aurette.

'Nice to put a face to the art, Aurette. You did a fine job.'

Aurette grinned like a small girl. Diana inhaled her cigarette and looked at Grace, who gave her a small nod and moved away through the crowd.

Later, happy and drunk, the room warm and loud with music, Diana and Aurette were talking to a short story writer, when a tall, handsome guy sidled up to them, putting his pint glass down hard on a small high-top table, almost tipping it over. People nearby turned to look.

'Oops,' he said, lifting his glass up out of the puddle of beer it made, and taking a sip. 'Hey, there.' He was looking at Aurette. She smiled at him curiously, turning her body slightly towards him to include him in the conversation. 'So,' he began, loudly. He lifted a meaty finger and pointed it at her. 'You're Aurette Taylor, right?'

Aurette froze for a moment, her smile falling a little, then said, 'Yeah, yeah I am.'

Diana and the other writer were listening, and now others were, too. Diana's body was still. Waiting. Listening to the low murmurs. *Oh yeah, I thought I recognized her. And her mom is...*

'Right, right. Yeah, the famous Aurette Taylor,' the guy said, leaning in. He leered at Aurette, and they could smell him. He moved closer: 'I'm friends with Tim. *Remember Tim?*'

He thought he was being clever. Teasing. His voice was hard. He watched Aurette's face grow stony, and he pretended to almost spit out his drink.

'Aha! You *do*. Wow, you *do* remember him. OK. I'll let him know. Yeah, Tim and I are buddies. He told me he had a thing with Marianne Taylor's

daughter and that she was here at Camp RBU.’ He looked her up and down again, smiling wolfishly, then shaking his head. ‘Tim always liked the younger girls.’ He laughed again, leaning his elbow on the unsteady table. ‘Do people here even know how famous you are, girl? I mean, *damn*. Tim told me about your house in Toronto, and your *mom*. Holy shi—’

‘OK, buddy, we’re all good here,’ said Diana, moving her body so she was standing in front of him, matching, even bettering. him in height.

He scoffed. ‘Who are you, her body guard?’ He squinted at her. ‘Her lover?’

‘Fuck off.’ Diana spun around, whipping her hair in his face, placing her back to him, saying to Aurelle and the other girl, ‘So, should we leave? There’s a party at Segwun.’

By then, though, Aurelle was already retreating, disappearing into her mind. She knew things couldn’t stay the way they were. She was Aurelle Taylor again. *Marianne Taylor’s daughter*. From now on, there would be conversation after conversation like this: where people found out who she was and treated her differently and Diana came to her rescue. She missed it already, being mostly unknown, being a blank slate. And she knew only one way to get that feeling back.

PART II

C ‘*OMING THROUGH SLAUGHTER IS MY favourite!*’ Aurelle was gushing to a girl with long black hair. Her name was Leanne. They sat cross-legged together by a woodstove in the Art Den and held old-fashioned champagne cups with etched snowflakes on them, filled with red wine. Aurelle’s red lips were stained dark; she looked like a child who’d had a popsicle.

‘It’s so poetic, it doesn’t even seem like prose,’ Leanne said back.

Aurelle nodded fervently, taking a quick gulp.

‘Exactly! Exactly!’ Her wine sloshed out of her glass. She reached out and ran her hand down Leanne’s arm. ‘You are so pretty.’ Leanne cocked her head and smiled sweetly, holding Aurelle’s other hand up to her cheek.

Diana was across the room, watching. She knew that Aurelle had been badly shaken by that moron at Taxx a few nights earlier; that she hated when her life before RBU upstaged their lives now. Diana had never thought she should pretend, felt that Aurelle should wear her family name and fame with pride. She shouldn’t hide from any of it. People would kill for that. It irritated Diana, pushed against the love she had for Aurelle, and bristled something deep inside her. She couldn’t square it, couldn’t make sense of it.

She took a sip of her own wine and turned to look at her fellow Fine Arts students, standing around, dancing idly, talking, pulling out paintings and drawing at easels on the fly. She had become astute at assessing them in terms of their talent and potential threat to her success. She knew who she could disregard, who had talent, who had brains, who had hustle, who had all of it. All of it was key. But tonight, they were benign and harmless individuals who each shone in their own special ways. She was feeling the effects of the tablets of E that she and Aurelle had taken early in the night. Her body felt like it was humming warmly and she was smiling, her teeth showing; she was grinning, actually. She laughed to herself.

Marianne had come to visit the day before, as promised. When Aurelle opened the door, her mother engulfed her in a hug that smelled of home, and Aurelle smiled into her shoulder, breathing it in, feeling so many

things. Wishing her mother was someone plain and normal, not the reason that people now stared at her as she walked through a room.

‘Oh, my darling,’ Marianne said, holding her out to survey. ‘Let me look at you.’ She cupped Aurelle’s pale face in her hand and said, ‘The house is not the same without you, my love.’ Aurelle smiled tightly and looked away, and Marianne noticed Diana standing shyly at the kitchen counter. ‘Or either of you! Hello, Diana! How are you, love?’

‘Hi, Marianne,’ Diana said, lifting a hand in greeting then making the short distance to the doorway to receive her own hug. ‘I’m so glad you came.’ Aurelle noticed, not for the first time, how her friend towered over her mother.

‘Of course! It’s been too long! I can’t wait to see all the work you’ve told me about! And this one’ – she shook Aurelle by the elbow – ‘is not a phone person, at least with me, so I had to make sure she was alive! And she is. Although, thinner than I saw you last, dear.’ There was a glint in Marianne’s eye, a small chastisement, and Aurelle felt the sharp point of it. ‘Now: where are we going for lunch?’

They drove in Marianne’s car to a very fancy restaurant in town, overlooking the lake. Diana sat in the front at Marianne’s insistence – ‘because of your wonderful long legs!’ – and chattered nervously to her, watching her profile closely. Aurelle sat in the backseat and read *Paradise Lost*, circling passages she thought she should revisit later. Marianne looked at her in the mirror twice, Diana noticed.

There were windows all across the restaurant and the three of them sat at a sun-drenched table enjoying the view of the winter landscape.

‘It is cold out there,’ Marianne observed as three glasses of Pinot Noir were brought by a young server, who gushed at Marianne: ‘I have four pairs of your shoes. I am *such* a fan! I’m sorry for interrupting!’ The girl had blushed, and Marianne thanked her graciously. She turned and hurried back to the kitchen.

‘Yes, the famous Rocky Barren winters,’ Marianne continued when they were alone again, looking out at the snow and effecting a theatrical shiver. ‘You know, I dropped out just after first year when I went here. But I remember how chilly and gloomy it got in the winter, and how hard it was to adjust after the beautiful fall.’ She suddenly looked at Diana. ‘Does a woman named Grace teach here still?’

Diana started. 'Yes. Grace McLaughlin. She's the chair of the program.'

Marianne chuckled. 'Is she? We went here at the same time. She took herself *very* seriously, I remember that. A little... over the top. She still like that?'

Diana bristled. 'She's very passionate.'

'That's the word for it,' Marianne laughed. 'It doesn't surprise me she never got out of here. She was *obsessed* with this place.' She paused. 'Well, good for her.' She smiled and waved a hand. 'Anyway, enough ramblings from me and my memories. I hardly went here!'

'Well,' Diana said, sipping her wine, glad for the change in subject. 'I think you've done OK in spite of it.'

'Thank you, honey,' Marianne said. She looked closer at Diana. 'You look so well, Diana. I like your hair longer. And—' she reached to touch the cuff of the shirt Diana was wearing. 'Is that Aurelle's shirt? It suits you.'

Aurette took a drink and asked, 'Are you going to your cottage studio while you're up here?' She herself had only ever gone to her mother's studio on occasion. It was understood that it was Marianne's place.

'I think so, yes. I like cocooning in there with the fire going.' She made a show of wrapping her arms around herself as though she was in front of a glowing fireplace. 'Don't worry. It's far enough away from RBU that I won't disturb you two! And I have some things I'm working on that need some quiet to get right.'

'What are you working on now?' Diana asked. In her heart she harbored a hope that Marianne might one day invite her to the studio, that maybe they could collaborate on something, or at least work side by side. She imagined her own paintings hanging in the Taylor home alongside other collected art pieces. Her face reddened at this fantasy, and she pushed it out of her mind, telling herself to respect Marianne's process.

Marianne waved her off. 'Oh, it's not that interesting. But I can't wait to visit your studio space and see what you're up to,' she said, her eyes wide. 'And Aurelle, tell me *everything* about your classes!' She took both of her daughter's hands in hers. 'I want to know all of it. I've missed you desperately!'

Diana smiled warmly and also turned to Aurelle. She ignored the tightness in her chest when her friend looked annoyed by her mother's interest.

But, later, Marianne did come with her to the Den, slipping into a side

door that Diana opened for her so that she didn't *become the attraction*, as she said. And she spent a good amount of time examining Diana's works in progress, her assignments that included landscapes and still-life work, studies of fabrics and wood. 'Diana, I am so proud of you,' she had said, and Diana held those words in her heart, words she had never heard from her own parents as a child, knowing that she would revisit them several times in the cold weeks that followed.

And now, as the Ecstasy worked its way into her system, her mind and body, Diana reflected on Marianne, on how she felt so lucky, so blessed; fortune had smiled on her, to have the Taylor family bring her into the fold after so many years of wanting and watching from her octagon window, so much loneliness and, later, sadness that felt like it actually radiated from her family home. But the Taylors! Marianne! Marianne, celebrity designer in the stratosphere of Lagerfeld, Versace, Westwood. Marianne, who was famous and glamorous and brilliant. Marianne, who loved Diana – like a daughter, she was sure. Of course she loved Aurelle more, and Diana loved Aurelle, too, and weren't they all so lucky, she thought. She found one of the large couches in the studio and fell into it, and was suddenly aware that she was brushing arms with a tall, good-looking guy beside her, and her body felt electric. He was talking to someone else, then turned to look at Diana. He gave her a crooked smile, and Diana heard herself asking him if he wanted to fuck.

And they did. Diana's long, lean body hummed and vibrated while they had what was actually fairly run-of-the-mill sloppy sex in an art supply closet, but she found it incredibly satisfying. Her eyes opening wide, and then closing, she groaned in her deep husky voice while this Engineering student worked her over with a great deal of enthusiasm. *What's your name*, he may have asked, and maybe her mind was elsewhere – maybe thinking of her friend and how she was so innocent, so unencumbered, born under luck and love and fortune – but he hardly heard her anyway when she said it. When she said, *Taylor*.

One evening, Aurelle decided to walk down to their dock and have a whiskey alone in the cold air. Diana was working at the Den but would be home later. Donning her big winter coat, she poured herself a large glass and, opening the sliding doors at the ground level, she headed outside.

It was bitterly cold, especially close to the water, and she shivered at first, finally settling into a chair on the dock and nestling down into her coat. It wasn't quite dark yet. A grey sky on the verge of night. The bare branches of trees waved in the air at the edges of the water.

It was hard to calm her mind. Aurelle wasn't used to being alone, although she had always enjoyed the charms of solitude when she could carve it out for herself. She had grown up in a crowd, in the public eye, in a home that never slept. Some of her favourite things about living in a large house had been the results of her efforts at slipping away unnoticed, hiding in her room, the sound of people reduced to a muted din. She took several sips of her drink now, at first coughing against the harshness but soon welcoming its heat. She marveled at that characteristic of whiskey: its ability to shock initially, only to comfort with each sip. She had thought she hated it the first time she tried it, then declared it her new drink an hour later. That had been with Diana, like so many of her firsts. She closed her eyes, listening to the cold water. Diana was over there, across the lake, working away: unflappable, singularly focused. Could she feel Aurelle thinking of her?

Then there was the snapping of branches, voices, that jarred her out of her reverie. She turned in her chair, her heart beating hard. A group of people were walking around the house, pointing up at it, marveling in its grandeur, oblivious to the girl sitting in the Adirondack chair down at the dock.

'Hello?' Aurelle heard her voice: weak, frightened. It didn't carry. She tried again, louder this time, and they stopped, turning towards her. She struggled out of the chair and stood to look up at them, feeling trapped. Solitude shattered.

'Oh!' One of them yelled down to her. 'Hey! We didn't know anyone was home.'

It was a guy, his voice deep and loud. He started to descend the large stone steps towards the water like he had been there before, his friends following. His steps quickened because of the steep drop, and he appeared suddenly in front of Aurelle, who held herself close, unsure where to put her arms, aware of her hair, her expression, her whiskey, everything. He was smiling and putting out his hand.

'Brent. Hi.'

She shook it, saying her own name. Confused. Blushing. There were three guys and a girl on the dock with her now. She swallowed, smiling

awkwardly.

‘This place is awesome,’ one of the guys said, looking around the large dock and back up at the house, which glowed with light from the living room, and the kitchen where Aurelle had poured herself her drink. They would have seen her from here, she thought. Could have been watching.

‘Thank you.’

‘Sorry for coming around here,’ the girl said – the only one who looked embarrassed that they were there. ‘We were hiking, and these guys got curious.’

‘Can we sit?’ Brent asked, gesturing at one of the chairs nearby. Putting down a knapsack he was carrying as he said it.

‘I don’t know if–’ the girl said, and Aurelle looked at her hopefully. But Brent was already sitting and pulling around chairs for the others. He reminded her of Diana’s brother, Keith, in that moment. The brazen seizing of everything he saw before him. He unzipped his knapsack and offered Aurelle a beer, then noticed the glass near her chair.

‘Oh, you’re way ahead of us!’ He laughed, and wagged a finger at her. He cocked his head. ‘Hey... Your mom is the “Rave Queen,” am I right? Mary Taylor?’

‘Marianne,’ the girl corrected him. She smiled apologetically at Aurelle, then put her hand on her chest and said, ‘I’m Jen.’ Aurelle nodded and smiled. Jen was still standing. She and Aurelle shared an awkward look, then Brent spoke again.

‘Yep, and this is Mike and Sean,’ he said, gesturing to the guys who were relaxing in chairs, drinking and talking, pointing at the school across the lake. ‘So, you’re Marianne Taylor’s daughter.’ He nodded as he drank, his eyes hard on Aurelle. ‘I’ve seen you in magazines and shit. How come you never wear your mom’s clothes? I bet you get them free, right? What, do you, like, *hate* your mom?’ He leaned in, leering.

‘I wear them sometimes,’ Aurelle said quietly.

Brent smirked, ‘I’d like to see that. I remember that cherry-popping shirt you wore.’ He shook his head, laughing. ‘Shit, that was so hot. You could almost see your,’ he bit his lip to stop himself and suppressed a groan. The others laughed, except for Jen, who wrung her hands nervously. Brent looked at his friends and shrugged. ‘Sorry, sorry. But it was. So hot. You must have known that. Girls know what they’re doing, am I right?’

Aurette was losing her grip on something. She thought she heard a sound near the house. A car door? She picked up her glass and took a sip; then an impulse saw her tip the rest of the whiskey into her mouth, and Brent, who hadn't stopped staring, widened his eyes appreciatively. 'Girl can drink!' he hollered, louder, it seemed to her, than necessary, his voice bouncing on the water. Mike and Sean laughed and clinked glasses. Jen turned her head towards the cottage.

And then, suddenly, there was Diana. A looming silhouette. Then she was coming down the steps to the water quickly, her car keys jangling in one of her hands, hair waving behind her. An avenging angel. Aurette smiled up at her, relief rushing into her veins.

'Hi there,' Diana offered, her voice strong and confident. 'I see we have company.'

'Sorry,' Jen said quickly. 'We were just on a walk and...' She drifted off lamely.

'And we saw Aurette, so we came to say hi!' Brent said cheerfully. 'Come join us!' He gestured to the empty chair beside him. Diana looked at him levelly.

'Much as I would love to...' She tilted her head, waited for him to supply his name. He did, so she continued, 'Yes, Brent, of course. Aurette and I haven't had dinner yet.' She stood still, waiting.

Brent nodded, pursing his lips, 'Ah. Gotcha. "Dinner time" at the grown-ups' house.' He looked at his friends, chuckling, and made a show of getting up. 'I guess that's our cue. *Personas non grata*. Message received.' He rolled his eyes. He came close to Aurette, his breath smelling strongly of beer, and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. 'Thanks for the hospitality,' he growled. 'I'm at Segwun, in case you're ever in the neighbourhood.' Aurette patted his large back, and waved at the others feebly as they climbed up the stairs.

Diana and Aurette watched them go, saying nothing to each other until they were out of sight.

'You OK?' Diana asked, turning to look at Aurette, her expression tender now, all evidence of severity gone. She searched Aurette's face.

'Yes. Yeah. Totally.' Aurette said breathlessly, embarrassed, laughing in spite of herself. 'Weird – they just showed up.' She picked up her empty glass, feeling foolish for coming out at all. Her hands were shaking slightly.

‘God, it’s freezing, isn’t it?’

Diana nodded, pushed a piece of hair out of Aurelle’s eyes.

They linked arms and, walking as one, climbed back up the steps to their home.

THE GIRLS WENT BACK HOME for Christmas break. The Taylors were to be going away to Whistler, British Columbia, for a quick ski holiday over the festive period. Aurelle begged Diana to come along, but she declined, surprising even herself. She felt that she should see her parents, knowing how difficult the holidays could be, especially given that she hadn't been part of their lives in any capacity since she left in September. She and Aurelle rode home together in her car and, when they arrived, went immediately to the Taylors'. Diana looked over her shoulder at her own house as they opened the front door, and Marianne cheered at their arrival. 'You're here!'

She held Aurelle in a long hug and smiled at Diana over her shoulder before embracing her as well.

'My girls,' she said, and Diana's heart swelled. Marianne ran her hands over Aurelle's hair and kissed her forehead. 'Honey, I've missed you so much. I never hear from you!' she chastised, and Aurelle became immediately mopey, shrugging and ducking her touch. Diana's mouth tightened. *Stop it*, she thought. Marianne continued to study Aurelle. 'You look very pale, darling. And still thin.'

Diana watched this and cleared her throat. 'Um, are you excited about your trip?'

'Oh, well, you know,' Marianne said, as they followed her out of the hallway littered with suitcases into the kitchen where a table of snacks was laid out. 'I'm not really much of a skier, but I can "après" with the best of them,' she popped a carrot in her mouth and winked. 'How are your parents, Diana?'

'They're good,' Diana said instinctually. 'They're glad I'm home.' She hadn't seen them yet. She exchanged a glance with Aurelle, who smiled sympathetically. Diana stiffened.

'I bet they are. I hate having Aurelle gone! Something about a daughter,' Marianne said, then caught herself, and looked quickly at Diana. 'Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I meant no disrespect to Keith's memory.'

Diana waved her off. 'That's OK. It's fine. I get it. Plus, I know what you mean. It must seem a lot different without Aurelle here.' She wondered if

Marianne knew quite how close they were, if she knew that some nights they both slept better wrapped in each other's arms, that they were living their lives in indulgent debauchery, as though they had both finally been set free. She said none of this, of course, but played with her fingers.

Marianne smiled at her. 'I'm glad she has you to watch out for her.' Diana nodded while Aurelle looked out the window, biting into a biscuit, wishing that she was somewhere else, someone else.

On Christmas morning, Diana sat in a stiff chair and opened a gift from her parents, who sat side by side on the couch, each holding a coffee as they had when she and Keith had been children. She unwrapped a pair of tan leather gloves. Diana held them up to her cheek, feeling their cool softness. She wondered what Marianne and Aurelle were doing, and she felt the sharp pangs of jealousy, love and ambition for such a tiny moment – but they were hardly there, and then they were gone. She inhaled and regained control. She closed her eyes briefly. 'Thank you,' she said, 'they're beautiful.'

Later, they had dinner at the large teak dining table, choral music playing quietly in the background. That night, as the snow fell, Diana put on the TV. *A Charlie Brown Christmas* was near the end. They were singing 'O! Tannenbaum!' and Diana's parents went to bed, each kissing the top of her head while she chewed a very hard chocolate caramel that she'd chosen from a box of Pot of Gold that their cleaning lady had left them.

While the Taylors were skiing, Diana was unsure what to do with herself. She didn't want to hang around her own house so told her mother she had work to do for school, making excuses to leave and drive around the city, parking and then walking the wintery streets, stopping occasionally to have coffee in the empty cafés that were open in the days after Christmas. She brought a small sketchpad and made studies while she was out. That woman. That boy. That table leg. She was bored and found all of the Christmas decorations depressing.

She remembered that she had a spare key for the Taylor house, and told herself that no one would mind if she went. Maybe they'd like her to make sure everything was alright there. She parked her car around the corner and walked to the house, holding the key between her fingers, swiftly letting herself in.

‘Hello?’ she called, out of instinct, into the quiet foyer. Nothing. She breathed deeply, her favourite smells. The house was in good order – presumably the cleaning lady had been and put everything back together after the rush of the family departing for the airport. Diana slipped out of her boots and proceeded into the house, running her hands over surfaces, picking up books and flipping through them. On one wall, there was a large family portrait. The Taylors were standing in the sun on a beach, grinning with their arms slung around one another’s backs. Easy. Happy. Marianne’s head was tipped back, her teeth gleaming, mid-laugh; Diana could almost hear her. Aurelle wore a shy smile, standing between her oldest and youngest brothers. They were all so good-looking. Shifting her gaze slightly, she saw herself in the reflection of the glass, watching them. Her hair, now shoulder-length, hung limply. Her mouth a frown. She lifted her hand and, with her fingernails, combed a side part in her hair, pulling it across her head, the way Aurelle wore hers. She stared at her face, considering every inch of it. That line. That freckle. Her thick eyebrows, her sharp jaw. She was not a Taylor. Too severe, not pretty. To console herself, she thought of compliments Marianne had given her on her artwork, on her skill. Her heart slowed and she continued, for a moment longer, to stare at her serious face, studying its lines.

On the long, narrow table at waist height was a bowl with assorted odds and sods. Earrings and matchbooks and keys. There was a tube of lipstick. Diana opened it, recognizing Aurelle’s shade of bright red. She had always worn this colour, for as long as Diana had begun noticing her. It was her signature: the colour she had been seen wearing in the famous cherry tee photo, and always since. Diana ran the red over her lips, smacking them together and considering the effect. She looked back to the picture, to Aurelle, to Marianne. To her reflection. She looked ghoulish. Her face flushed and she wiped the back of her hand hard against her mouth, leaving a violent red smear across her knuckles.

Diana walked up the stairs, noticing every sound she made in a house that was normally full of chatter and footsteps, music and laughter. She went to the top floor, to Aurelle’s room. She pushed open the door, breathing deeply the smell of her friend, present even in her absence. Aurelle’s bed was made, and there were two old teddy bears propped up on her pillows. Diana picked one up and held it to her chest, then buried her face in its matted fur

and kissed its head quietly. The red lipstick left a small mark like a gash on its crown. She lay down on the bed, careful not to make an imprint, and stared at the ceiling. *What if this was all mine too*, she thought. *What if, even, it was me instead of her?* She curled to her side, and her eyes welled up. A tear fell onto Aurelle's bedspread, and Diana angrily wiped her face and sat up. *No*. She wouldn't permit self-pity. She got up and smoothed the bed, replacing the teddy bear, and went back downstairs, her chin high.

She was about to pass Marianne's studio, when she paused – and tried the knob of the door. It opened. Diana hesitated for a moment, then went in. This trespass felt so much greater than anywhere else in the house. It was Marianne's artistic sanctuary. But, Diana told herself, she'd been here before. Marianne had invited her in when she was new to their lives; she knew so much more now. A fellow artist could take such liberties. She ran her finger along the long work table and paged through some sketches. She thought of some suggestions she might make to Marianne to improve some of the ideas, but then realized she couldn't reveal she'd been here. Maybe Marianne would have her in again, invite her confidence now that Diana was proving herself as an artist. Feeling this, and nodding to herself, Diana left the house. She spent the remainder of the holidays doubling down on her own work, ensuring not a moment was wasted when she could be getting better at her craft.

Aurette loved skiing, mainly for the solitude it provided: a private sport cloaked as a shared activity. On their second day on the slopes, she found herself repeatedly without her family on the gondolas going up the hills and spending the day feeling only the sting of cold air on the small patches of her face exposed to the elements. No one recognized her in her goggles, helmet and neck warmer, and her small body thrummed as she pitched downward faster than she had ever skied before. She was a skilled skier, but had typically shied from danger. But now, she threw herself down the mountains, cutting back and forth on a knife edge. When she finally caught up with the others, her face was red and windburnt, and she sat in the chalet, exhausted, allowing the din of her siblings, her parents, to wash over her. She spent the holiday flirting with self-destruction on the slopes, never wanting it to end; wanting it to end immediately.

On the plane home, she stared out the window, her mind already back at

RBU while her mother ordered champagne and snacks; her brothers clinked glasses as the plane rose higher and higher, the mountains shrinking below them.

THE GIRLS RETURNED TO CAMPUS early, telling their parents they had assignments that they needed to get back to finish. It was now 1996, their second semester at RBU about to commence. Aurelle wanted to bask in the solitude of their cottage. Diana was determined to escape the grim quiet of her family home and get to work at the Den, putting her ideas from the break into practice. Almost immediately upon returning, she threw herself into her work, spending long hours at the studio. She had returned to school galvanized, determined to make something of herself, something to be noticed, by Grace, by Marianne, but also to shine in the world. She painted constantly, and had begun to push her body athletically again as well, remembering the thrill she got from physical demands. She hiked and skated, using both means to get to the studio, often leaving Aurelle the keys to the car on the dining room table while she slept late.

‘Where are you going?’ Aurelle asked one afternoon, still in her pajamas, her eyes dark and hooded.

Diana looked at her. ‘To work,’ she said, which meant to the studio. She gestured at the bright sky outside their many windows, her keys jangling in her fist as she did so. ‘You might want to get out and greet the day before it’s over.’ Aurelle rolled her eyes and Diana dropped her hands to her sides, frustrated, but softening. ‘Do you want to come with me?’

‘No thanks. Nothing to do there.’

‘Well, I’m sorry, Aurelle, I can’t provide activities for you. I have work to do.’

‘I never asked you to.’

‘Will you come across later? Want me to come back for you?’

‘I’ll go myself,’ Aurelle said, then: ‘Sorry, I’m just tired. I’ll have a nap and find you later. I’ll hike around.’ She forced a smile. ‘It’ll be refreshing.’

Diana nodded, thinking it more likely that Aurelle would hitch a ride with a student passing on the road. She now often found her friend wandering through parties on campus, so drunk or high that it seemed like an act of self-harm or revenge, so specific and determined was her longing to dissolve and disappear.

The whole campus knew who Aurelle was now. In one of her classes, a

discussion had developed about class and wealth in *The Great Gatsby*, and when Aurelle had tried to make a comment about Jay Gatsby's empty life, she'd heard Leanne, with whom she'd talked at great length about books at a party and who was one of a number of scholarship kids, mutter, 'Easy for you to say.' Another student had laughed and put her hand over her mouth, shrugging when Aurelle caught her eye.

'I'm sorry,' Leanne had said. 'But my sympathy does not lie with the Gatsbys of the world. I mean, you basically live on West Egg.' Aurelle had opened her mouth, then shut it again, for who was she to say anything?

Later, she'd mentioned the incident to Diana.

'You're lucky.' Diana said simply, as she had many times. 'People will always be jealous. What can you do but use it to your advantage?'

Aurelle said nothing at first. Then, 'Look, you don't know how it is. People are jealous of you because you're talented, you've earned it. Your family is just as wealthy as mine, I know people talk about that, but no one knows who you are outside of here because you're not in magazines and shit. My name is basically a dollar sign.' Diana struggled to hide her irritation at hearing Aurelle's churlishness towards her family's fame. She was aware of the privilege she and Aurelle enjoyed and how it threw into harsh relief those students for whom all of it was foreign, but she would give it all up for a different life; one that didn't include Keith, who robbed her of any self-worth before meeting the Taylors and feeling the warmth of their sun, the addictive heat of their fame. Since coming here, Diana was becoming well-known at RBU for her skill, but she wanted more.

People often asked Aurelle about Diana, and she was glad to talk her up, to turn the spotlight in another direction so she herself could remain in the shadows. She was proud of Diana, and saw her friend's newfound notoriety and recognition as the good twin of her own fame, which was a curse to her but clearly something Diana wanted. She found it difficult to make any new friends now, enjoying only the company of random encounters and her one other friend, Rachel, from the *Badlands* magazine. Aurelle had continued to write her small poems and sometimes showed them to Rachel, who was kind and easy to be around. Rachel also thought Diana was fascinating.

'The two of you, you're like this powerful, mystical duo,' she'd said one evening, her eyes sparkling. 'It's weird. Like, people confuse the two of you. They don't know which one is the heiress and which is the artist,

which is so funny for anyone who knows you. You're so different... except for some of your mannerisms.'

'What do you mean?' Aurelle asked.

'Oh, you know. No offense, but the private school way you talk. Kind of formal, like, rich. Some people even think you're starting to look alike. I mean, I know Diana has grown her hair and sometimes wears red lipstick, but she is just so tall, it's like she's this...' she grappled for the words. 'Like a funhouse mirror version of you.' She laughed then, and Aurelle smiled, but didn't mean it.

'Your poetry is really strong, you know,' Rachel said then, as though sensing Aurelle's deflation. 'I shouldn't have said that. "The heiress." That's not true. People think of you as more than that, of course. *Of course.*' She gave Aurelle's arm a little shake as though she was being silly and paranoid, as though Rachel hadn't just said exactly what Aurelle knew to be true. 'A lot of people said they liked your poem in the zine,' Rachel continued, and Aurelle nodded at her, wishing she'd shut up. She pretended to listen as Rachel listed the redeeming qualities of her poetry – the subtlety, the observational skill, the appreciation of things other people would think of as plain and boring – and even went so far as to off-handedly put down Diana's art, which she said was overrated. Aurelle focused on the failing light playing between the pine trees and she wished she was high.

I N 1994, BEFORE KEITH DIED, before she met Aurelle, Diana turned sixteen, and she was given a car, just like Keith had been. It was a red Miata convertible and it didn't suit her at all, which is just the kind of thing that a rich girl thinks when her parents buy her a car. *Spoiled, rich bitch*, she chastised herself. She hugged her mother, who said it was her father who chose it, and she hugged him, too. *Thank you*, she'd said, *I love it*. She felt silly in it, but grew to love her independence, her tiny moving room away from her family. She drove all over Toronto, listening to mixtapes she'd made for that exact purpose. Guided by Voices. Stereolab. Yo La Tengo. Mazzy Star. Velvet Underground. Music that made her feel older and alone, and like that might be a good thing.

Once, when she was driving across Bloor, she saw Marianne Taylor herself coming out of the Marianne Taylor storefront. People were pointedly trying not to look at her as she exited a store with her own name written above her in huge, shiny black letters. Marianne put her sunglasses on and lifted a small hand to wave at a couple of teenaged girls who stood at the entrance grinning at her. She looked shy and small, and Diana's heart went out to her. Someone honked behind Diana and she saw the light had turned green. She put her foot on the gas, Marianne retreating into a tiny picture of a girl in her rearview.

June 1994. The weekend prior – 'May Two-Four,' a long weekend usually reserved for partying – Keith had invited friends up to the cottage for what Diana imagined was a blowout. She stayed in Toronto and drove around alone, aware each time she pulled into the driveway that there were more cars parking on the street, more people going into the Taylor compound next door. The BBQ was going all weekend, she saw from her bedroom, and Mr Taylor was stationed there, sunglasses perched on his head, laughing with his kids and their friends, saying hi to their parents as they were dropped off (*Of course, they can stay as long as they like!*), putting his arm around Marianne's waist whenever she came outside to bring something to him (a plate, a beer, burger buns). Diana's own parents spent the weekend working on gardening projects in the backyard, willfully

ignorant of the joyful sounds coming over the fence. Diana didn't see Aurelle all weekend and wondered if she had been invited elsewhere. Lately, she'd seen her only at school, where she appeared wan and pale. The change in her usual upbeat demeanour and fresh appearance registered with Diana, but she thought little of it.

The first weekend of June.

'Can I go to the cottage tomorrow night?' Diana asked her mother on the Thursday. She didn't say *alone*, thinking they'd say no if she did. She picked a banana out of a bowl of fresh fruit and inspected it. Brown spots. She assumed it would be inferred that she was going with a friend or two. She wasn't. She wanted to go by herself. It was her turn. Pull over on the way up when she felt like it. Listen to her tapes. She'd even made one for this purpose. She'd written *Cottage Drive* on the fresh white label. She was pleased with how her writing looked. She would listen to it and, when it was over, she'd take it out and flip it and listen to the other side. She'd arrive at the cottage and it would be quiet. She put the banana down and looked at her mother. Helen Martin was cutting a zucchini for a stir fry; she considered her daughter.

'Hmm. Darling, I don't know.'

'I've been going with you and Keith for years, Mom,' she pleaded. 'I know how to get there and how to get in and everything, and I'll drive before it's dark. I'll call as soon as I get there. You let Keith go.'

Her mother nodded. 'I'll talk to your father about it. No promises.'

'OK.'

Edward said yes, as Diana knew he would. He knew little of what went on in their house and treated his children like adults he passed in the hallways at the office.

'Be careful!' Her mother had said to her when she left. She was always careful.

Diana put the roof down on her convertible and took a deep breath of early summer air. She loved to be alone sometimes. She knew she was a contrarian, that she pined for the togetherness of the Taylor family, but couldn't imagine how she'd ever fit in. She envied the ease with which Keith did everything, with such blind thoughtlessness, without the weight of self-doubt that she felt like an iron blanket. She wondered if that was

why she leaned towards a quiet disposition, in complete relief and opposition to what she yearned for and couldn't have. In the same way that, because she couldn't find a way to wear Marianne's designs, she strove not for something close, not for an approximation, but for something entirely different. Her look was more London Fog than MT, opting for frank sophistication over zany fun, mostly because she couldn't get up the courage to pull off Marianne's designs. She wore men's brogues and loafers and collared shirts, tennis whites in the summer and camel and houndstooth in the winter. For now, she pulled on her tortoiseshell sunglasses, her hair blowing straight behind her, and embarked on a weekend alone up north.

It was early evening by the time she arrived. She smiled to herself as she unlocked the door, delighting that every sound was of her own making. *Click. Thump.* She hung her keys on the key rack, slipped off her sandals and raised her long arms in a stretch. She turned on the large ceiling fan and watched as it whirred to life. Some mail on the counter lifted at the corners.

The lake called to her through the windows. Sometimes it seemed like it was talking to her; it was a quiet voice, a whisper, a background rumble, rippling and winking and telling her that she was enough, that the water was hers, not his, not his crew of rowers, with their trunks and oars. *I hate him too*, the lake said. *He thinks I'm his, but I'm all yours.* Diana smiled back, and hurried to put on her bathing suit. She grabbed a towel and ran down to the dock.

It was a cool evening – not officially summer – and Diana's skin responded, tightening and goose-bumping, hair standing up all over her arms and legs. She wrapped the towel around her shoulders and sat at the end of the dock, dropping her legs into the water and letting out a little gasp at the cold. A boat rattled into view with a water-skier towing behind. Both the driver and the skier raised their arms in a wave, and so did Diana, her face splitting into an uncharacteristic, toothy grin.

She loved it here. The trees all around the cottage were her friends. She knew their seasonal moods: their fickle tantrums in storms, their temperamental shade in the summer and their preening beauty in the winter, covered in rounded, luscious lumps of snow. When Keith and his friends took the boat or the Sea-Doo around the lake, yelping in excitement and pointedly ignoring her, the trees rolled their leaves and the lake shushed and Diana read books and magazines, a large-brimmed hat protecting her fair

skin. But here, now, she was blissfully alone and had the forest for company.

And then, just then. As she was lying back on the dock and taking a large gulp of lake air, her hair stood on end – seconds later, she heard a car on the gravel. Her body knew before her mind did. A horn honking, music blaring then cutting out as the engine stopped running, doors slamming. He was here.

Diana stood up, furiously blushing as she wrapped herself in her towel and peered up at the cottage. Movement inside, and then the screen door of the balcony deck burst open. Keith strode out, opening his arms wide and shouting down to her, ‘Lady Diana! It’s like a funeral out here!’

He’d come, he said, because their parents thought he could keep her company, keep an eye on her. ‘But also because I just wanted to, and really don’t give two shits what you do,’ Keith laughed, making a batch of margaritas in the blender, the loudest appliance in the kitchen. Diana stood mutely by while Keith’s friends, Tim and a guy they called ‘Pits,’ shoved chips in their mouths from a bag. Claire, right-now girlfriend, and a girl named Missy came out of the bedrooms having changed into bikinis.

‘Whoa, my eyes!’ Keith laughed, and Pits threw a chip at him, as he peeked between two fingers and kissed the air at Claire. She laughed and pointed her toes, and announced in her baby voice that they were going down to the lake. The boys watched them leave and shared a meaningful look with each other.

‘You were just up here last weekend,’ Diana said.

‘So?’ Keith turned to his friends. ‘Grab a couple of beers; let’s go down to the dock.’

Diana watched them from inside. She’d closed the door but could hear girlish screams below as Keith lifted Claire in his arms and threatened to throw her in the lake. Diana turned away and went to her bedroom, and saw that someone had tossed an overnight bag on the bed. She repacked her things and took them down to the basement guest room, flicking on a light in the dark, cool space. She changed out of her bathing suit and lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. She wondered what was happening at the Taylors’. She imagined herself there. Pictured Mrs Taylor, Marianne, asking her to help with an MT project in the at-home art studio. She saw herself

sitting at a drafting table, chatting about style and design. Taking a break and hanging out with Aurelle in a quiet part of the backyard. Laughing at a shared joke. Biting into a burger cooked by Mr Taylor. Patio lanterns glowing around the pool. Soft music. She thought of her own parents, probably watching the news, drinking a glass of Pinot.

On the wall there was a framed photo of Keith, taken from behind, at a rowing meet. She stared at the back of his head in the photo, hating his hair. Hating his ears. His back. His arms. Before she knew what she was doing, she was standing in front of it. She made a fist and hurled it at the glass frame; it shattered, cutting her hand, falling to the ground.

THE NEXT MORNING, DIANA WENT kayaking. When she thought of that day in the years ahead, she would remember the peace. The water, the quiet. The inner calm. The hope that things would change if only she and Keith kept out of one another's way. She needed to quell her temper. She was ashamed of her outburst the night before. Not of the anger, which drove her, which she appreciated, but the chaos, the loss of control. She liked plans, order. She had swept the glass into the garbage in silence while Keith and his friends made dinner upstairs. She tried to ignore them but then heard her name and perked her ears, listening. Missy asked Keith if maybe his sister would like to join them and Keith had said, his voice muffled, 'Who, Diana? No, she's probably eating her hair for dinner.' Mock gasps. 'I'm sorry!' he laughed. 'She's my sister, but she's fucking weird.'

Diana spent the morning exploring Rocky Barrens University on the other side of the lake, wandering its mostly empty campus, dreaming of attending. Later, she felt happy when she docked and climbed up the steps to the cottage. Keith's friends were still sleeping. The kitchen was a mess and smelled like fried eggs. Keith was uncharacteristically awake and chipper, washing up from his own breakfast.

'Hey, Dummy,' Keith called out to her, lifting a dishcloth in a salute. She sat at the table, regarding him.

He was completely oblivious to the world, she thought, humming to himself while he did a very poor job washing the dishes. A plate rested in the drying rack with egg still clinging to its edge. Diana once again felt herself despising him. His bare torso, his swim trunks, the way his toenails needed clipping. She shook her head and tried to look out the window at the lake, but then turned back sharply and said: 'You don't give a shit about anyone but yourself, do you?'

Keith froze, like a cartoon character. He threw his soap-covered hands in the air and turned slowly, as though he was under arrest.

'Uh... I give up,' he said, a smile twitching on his face. 'Did I do something to upset you, Diana?'

Diana rolled her eyes and sipped her tea, looking away again. Feeling

foolish.

‘I’m no therapist – and, God knows, they would make a killing off you – but I think your problem is with yourself, you know,’ Keith said turning around again. He pulled the plug and dried his hands. ‘If you want something, go get it, do it, whatever. You’re so hesitant. So afraid. And then you’re just mad because I don’t give a shit what people think, and you do.’

‘I am not afraid,’ she said quietly, but she knew he was right.

He wiped his hands on his swim trunks and said, ‘I’m going for a swim.’ He left out the upper balcony door. His feet made a terrific noise all the way down the steps. And she said to him, alone in the empty room: ‘I hate you. I wish you would die.’

I hate you. I wish you would die.

The words repeated in her mind forever after.

She followed him, silently. She was the last one to hear him laugh, to see his face light up, in joy and cruelty. It was a beautiful, quiet morning. The silence rent only by splashes of water.

He dove in. He hit something. She said it over and over, to the paramedics, to her parents, to his friends, and finally to Aurelle.

Diana was inconsolable for four straight days after Keith died. She sobbed uncontrollably, and had to be physically lifted out of the cottage and carried to the car when they eventually went back to the city to begin funeral preparations. She didn’t remember her parents coming, but of course they had. She had no sense of anything around her during that time of acute grief and shock, which then passed like a thunder cloud and left her with a vast emptiness inside. Her hysteria turned in on itself. She became stiller, quieter, almost mute, committing herself to helping her parents in this time of life-changing sorrow, when her mother would become the person she would now always be: bedbound, depressed, ill with grief. She was a shadow, aiding them in their need but lacking definition – a foggy blur of a person.

She never cried about Keith after that, denying herself the indulgence. *Restraint.* In her newly formed memory, she would take his criticism to heart. She wouldn’t care what people thought. She would take what was hers.

When Marianne Taylor saw her outside the Martin house after the funeral,

in the early days of her new normal, and invited her in, Diana was surprised that this thing she had always yearned for could be so simple, could just happen. She thought of what Keith had said about how she should just go for things if she wanted to, and decided that his easy way of seeing the world, that uncomplicated optimism, could be a lasting gift. It wasn't in her true nature to be gregarious or to initiate encounters, but she decided she could start to say yes to things, rather than considering them until her own indecision looped back on itself.

'Diana?' Marianne had said. Diana closed the door to her car, groceries in her hands, plastic handles digging into her palms. She looked up at Marianne, startled, and said, 'Yes?'

'Are you busy right now?' Marianne smiled kindly. 'After you put those away, of course.'

Diana looked at the bags like she'd forgotten they were there. 'Um. No. No, I'm not. Do you need help with something?'

She laughed. 'No, sweetie. But, hey, how would you like to come over? Aurelle is home and I'm sure she'd love to have some company. She's been a bit funny lately.' She said this so honestly, winking, that Diana immediately felt she was on the inside.

'Oh,' Diana said. 'Sure, that's really nice of you. Let me just –' She gestured at the bags, and Marianne laughed her kind laugh again and apologized for holding Diana up.

'See you soon, then,' Marianne said, turning and going back up her front walk.

Inside her own house, in the cool dark, Diana put the groceries on the counter. She was aware of the small movements required to do the tasks at hand, glad she could accomplish them. The fridge door opened and closed with a satisfying *thump*. She'd left the lights off, and stood, when she was finished putting things away, with her hands on her hips. There was a note on the table from her mother, saying that she was resting. Her father had returned to work two days after the funeral like a stoic soldier. Her mother had disappeared into the gauzy haze of medicated sleep. The house would feel forever empty now. Diana helped her parents to fill the fridge with food occasionally, but otherwise they left her largely alone, assuming – wrongly – that she would like to return to the routine of seeing friends whom she had never truly had to begin with.

‘OK,’ Diana said out loud into the room. ‘Yes.’ And she left, lifting her chin and steeling herself, standing tall.

‘Would you like me to stay over?’ she would ask Aurelle in the days after. ‘Want me to stay with you?’ *Yes. Yes, I’d love it. Yes, please don’t go. Let’s watch a movie. Let’s have a spa night. Let’s let’s let’s.* And then she stopped asking, because she understood. She stayed.

‘Diana, honey, can you grab those placemats?’ Marianne would say, as they prepared dinner. Rarely asking if she was joining them, just assuming she was. ‘I’ve gained a daughter!’ she crowed once, squeezing Diana gently, winking at Aurelle.

Being a part of the Taylor extended family was everything and nothing like she had imagined. She was a member of the inner sanctum, but also had a key to something deeper, a subterranean room of kinship that was based on her role as Aurelle’s confidant, her best friend. No one treated her as ‘Keith’s sister.’ She was Aurelle’s friend, and this small difference meant everything to her. As she’d expected, she adored the family home. She thrilled at Marianne’s hugs and their occasional private conversations after Aurelle had gone to bed. She imagined herself their daughter who had arrived via an alternate route. Marianne had a way of making Diana feel like she was singularly special and unique. Diana couldn’t imagine that she did the same with any of the other many young people who moved in and about the house; didn’t like to think of it at all.

The first time that Diana was alone with Marianne was three weeks after Aurelle’s abortion. Diana and Aurelle were together constantly and Marianne seemed to take credit for the relationship, saying over and over to the point of eye-rolling exasperation on Aurelle’s part, *I knew you two would get along! I can’t believe you’ve lived next to each other all these years and didn’t do anything about it!* Later, Aurelle would say something like, *I guess she’s right. Think of all the years we missed,* and squeeze Diana’s hand, who would say something like, *Well, we have to make up for lost time.*

Aurelle was tired so had gone to bed early, and Diana was still getting used to the fact that she was welcome to sleep over as often as she liked. She was in the front hall, having brought her overnight bag and pillow, when Marianne came into view. Her face looked uncharacteristically

serious and Diana realized Marianne hadn't noticed her, and that this was the face she had often seen from her window when she'd caught glimpses of Marianne on her own. She cleared her throat, not wanting to startle Marianne, who turned sharply, her mouth making a small O. She broke into a smile and grabbed her heart comically.

'Ha! Diana! I didn't see you there. I'm just all in my head right now.' She laughed quietly, then cocked her head to the left and paused. Then: 'Maybe you'd understand. Aurelle tells me that you're quite the artist.'

Diana had recently gotten up the nerve to show Aurelle some of her drawings, even the ones of the Taylors themselves. She was terrified that her friend would think she was creepy or strange, and that the past few weeks would melt away in an instant. Aurelle had stared at the drawings for a long time, and then hugged her friend, saying she loved them and that Diana was a 'wild talent.' Since then, Diana had brought her sketchbook over sometimes, and Aurelle posed for her. Not always her face, sometimes just her hands or her feet, things that Diana was trying to master. Diana might draw the triangle of her bent leg, the line of her body while she lay stretched out on the bed. Sometimes she did this while they were engaged in some other activity, sometimes it was the activity. It soon became commonplace for Diana to make a quick study of Aurelle, and it further cemented the intimacy between them in that unknowable way that even a mother like Marianne would have no inkling of. *Like this?* Aurelle would sometimes say, moving her body to accommodate Diana's eye. *No*, Diana would say, *just stay as you were*. Stay as you were. Don't change. Please.

Now Diana said to Marianne, almost apologetically, 'Um. Yeah. I like to draw.'

'Would you like to see my studio?' Marianne curled a piece of hair around her ear. Diana knew that Marianne's studio was one of the only places off-limits in the house.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, I would love to.'

The studio was at the back of the house and the door looked like all the others, although Diana noticed it had a lock. It was unlocked now, she supposed because Marianne was in the middle of working that evening. It was quiet in the house. The other Taylor children were out that night. Marianne held the door open and Diana walked in. It was a large, bright,

highly functional space, and Diana noted that it was a combination of fine art and design, inspiration and creation. There was an easel and a drafting table, a mannequin in the corner, a large sewing table with rolling stools nearby, a desk with a two-monitor desktop computer, a clothesline cutting across the ceiling with scraps of fabric and photos pegged in a haphazard row. There were a couple of stacks of sketchbooks on the table. Sewing machines set up in one corner. A printer. A bookshelf full of books jammed tightly together about design, architecture and fashion but also textiles, documentary film, landscape photography, graffiti, and more. On the wall were framed photos of a variety of things and people, and a few of the articles about the MT brand and Marianne herself.

‘Wow,’ Diana whispered, and Marianne closed the door.

‘I was just about to put a tea on,’ she said cheerfully, heading to a kettle and mugs set up on one of the counters. ‘Can I tempt you?’

Over the course of two hours, Marianne answered all of Diana’s questions about her work, her designs, her process. She was patient and humble, but not obnoxiously so. She showed Diana projects she was working on and asked her opinions, listening carefully to the answers. Diana fell under a spell: time stood still, she was enthralled with this person of such talent and grace. When asked if she had her sketchbook with her, Diana lied and said no. She couldn’t risk showing anything to Marianne, not until she had more to show. Eventually Marianne told her that she wouldn’t keep her, that she should let Diana get to bed, as though Marianne were an imposition and not the other way around. Diana swore silently that she would devote herself to becoming the kind of artist that would make Marianne proud.

She climbed the stairs up to Aurelle’s room full of energy, as if it were first thing in the morning and not after midnight. She was eager to take out her sketchbook and work. She looked back at Marianne’s studio, where the door was shut again, a sliver of light shining through where the door met the floor.

DIANA WAS NOT THE ONLY one who often stayed over at the Taylors' in the summer of 1994, that first summer of friendship with Aurelle. There were not only the enormous bedrooms of the Taylor children to accommodate, but the many spare guest rooms and couches. Mornings were a sleepy, stretching unveiling. Teens watched TV and shuffled to the kitchen to get coffee or tea, Marianne or Mitch always already up and dressed, cheerfully heading off for their own busy days or supervising the breakfast goings-on. They truly behaved as though their home and their love was open to all.

Diana and Aurelle were eating breakfast outside on the patio one morning, an Eggo and a scoop of cut fruit on each of their plates. People milled about, inside and outside. Diana noticed that Aurelle hardly seemed aware of them, so accustomed was she to people in her home. She sipped her coffee and flipped through the paper absently, her slender legs crossed, the right one bouncing slightly. Diana looked around the backyard, the specimen trees growing just so, leaves seeming to drip down, creating the illusion that they were in a remote and private sanctuary. Her back was to her own house, and she turned now to look up at her bedroom window, visible through the delicate leaves. Her parents were relieved that she had essentially moved into the Taylor home. Her mother moved through life like a zombie, distracting herself with charity work and spending increasingly long stretches in bed; her father was busy with his work on Bay Street, in the financial sector. It surprised her how easily they were able to shift out of one another's lives.

It was nearing the end of summer. Since her first visit to Marianne's studio, Diana had drawn in her sketchbook constantly. She brought it out in the open now, sitting by the pool, at the table – wherever they went. At first, having an artist around, drawing what she saw, was a novelty, and the rest of the kids who frequented the house would ask her if they could see what she was working on (*What's that? Can I see? Holy shit that's good. Like, you're really good!*). But like the subjects of a documentary, they became bored with her, and forgot she was there making studies of them: the way they stood with a hand on their hip, the way they looked when they

laughed, how the warmly lit kitchen looked from outside, how Marianne looked when she was reading, how Aurelle looked just now, her head dipped down, the morning sun shining on the part in her hair. Her book filled up with sketches and drawings of the goings-on at the house. It became a document, an artifact of her time there.

Diana had shown Marianne her book, shyly, not long after their evening in the studio. Marianne quietly turned the pages, and when she reached the end, she looked at Diana and nodded, smiling kindly. ‘You’re very skilled, Diana,’ she’d said, and Diana replayed the memory of those words in her mind many times. Since then, Marianne regularly checked in with Diana on the progress of her drawings, offering insights and asking questions, challenging her to push herself, to try more, to do something different. She was never overbearing, and Diana loved her with an unabashed loyalty that made Aurelle laugh, saying that Diana was a better, more natural daughter to her mother. ‘She likes you better than she likes me!’ And Diana blushed, thrilled. She shrugged and said something like, ‘We just have a lot in common, I guess.’

Now, she looked around at the trees again, and said, to Aurelle, ‘Do you want to go to my cottage with me?’

Aurelle looked up, coffee in hand. ‘Your cottage?’

‘Yeah. I mean. I know you have your own place up there, but...’

‘We never go there. That’s Mom’s.’

‘Right. So.’

‘I just didn’t know if you’d want to go back there so soon after...’

Diana nodded. ‘Yeah, I know. I didn’t, before, but now I’m wondering... It could be fun? Well. Maybe not fun, but...’

Aurelle smiled. ‘Sure. I’d love to go. Let’s get it over with.’

‘Exactly.’ Diana held up her own mug and offered a cheers. Aurelle clinked her cup against it, and they began to make plans.

Diana’s car rolled up the gravel driveway and the sound made her arm hair stand on end. She saw Keith everywhere, and her heart was pulled tightly in all directions. She felt short of breath and realized, after Aurelle put her hand on her shoulder, that she was breathing quickly through her nose. She was aware of her body, the aliveness of it, while her brother’s was ash. She pulled the key from the ignition and looked at the hand holding it. She took

her mind there, to his ruined body, to things that scared and repulsed her. She pulled it back. She froze.

‘Let’s go in,’ Aurelle said beside her. ‘Come on.’

Aurelle – thin and slight, *a delicate person*, as her mother would say, someone who kept her cards close to her chest yet smiled easily, a girlish young woman – walked around the car and opened the door for her friend. She reached across and took the keys. She put out her hand for Diana. And Diana, tall and imposing, strong of conviction and with a piercing anger at wrongdoing, loyal and protective, took Aurelle’s hand and allowed her bosom friend, her dear heart, to lead her into the house that would become their own home.

It wasn’t, of course, fun in any way at all. Diana was quiet, slowly becoming accustomed to being at the cottage again. She hadn’t appreciated how hard this would be. Her parents had been there, had taken Keith’s things, but he was still everywhere. The stereo had the last CD he played still inside it. The movies in stacks by the VCR were his favourites. There was still beer in the fridge that he’d brought up with him. Things a sister would notice.

She sat at the table, staring out at the lake in a kind of trance. It was evening. Aurelle had been making pasta at the stove, humming quietly to herself. She poured two glasses of cheap wine they’d brought with them and went to sit with Diana. She looked out the window as well. The lights from the campus were a warm glow across the lake. Through the open window, they heard the echo of laughter coming across the water.

‘My mom went to RBU, you know,’ she said lightly.

Diana started, taken out of her reverie.

‘What?’ she said.

In all of her research into Marianne, she had never read this anywhere. Marianne had never said. ‘She never told me that,’ she said then immediately regretted it.

Aurelle drank some wine and licked her lips. ‘You’re so funny. Yes, it’s true, despite the fact that she never told *you* that, Diana.’ She smiled kindly as Diana reddened. ‘Sorry, that was offside. I know you guys have your little friendship.’

Diana felt a small flicker of anger at this. She kept her face passive,

nodding.

Aurette continued, 'So, yeah. Back right before it closed. She was only there for a year, but then' – her mouth turned up crookedly – 'she got pregnant, they got married, you know... life. Then the college closed.'

'I had no idea,' Diana said quietly. How had she never read this, in all of her research on Marianne?

'Well,' Aurette said. 'Actually, the college didn't totally close. That's just what everyone thinks happened. They kept offering summer courses, and focused on trades and stuff. I think it may have changed its accreditation or something.' She took a breath and smiled. 'Anyway, yeah. Marianne Taylor, RBU student. Can't you just totally picture her there? Hippy, long hair, flowers in it and shit?' She laughed.

'Yeah, totally,' said Diana, and she drank, thinking of RBU and her visit the last time she was up north. She did try and imagine Marianne in the studio, the art she might have been making there. She looked at Aurette, her eyes alight with something for the first time since they arrived. 'Let's go over there,' she said. 'It's really cool. You'd like it.'

'Oh,' laughed Aurette. 'I've been there lots of times. Mom is always trying to convince me that I should go to school there when it's time.'

Diana remembered that they didn't, in fact, know everything about each other. She felt a pang of jealousy. Marianne had never suggested she go to RBU, even with all of their chats about her artwork. Had never even talked to her about her school plans. She cleared her throat and nodded.

'You know, we could live here if we went to RBU,' she said.

Aurette pictured them, living in their own private oasis, and a smile lit up her face. 'Wouldn't that be amazing? For sure, let's go over tomorrow.'

'I think I'd like to swim across,' Diana said, suddenly.

Aurette laughed kindly. 'You do that. You know I'm an *awful* swimmer. Barely doggy paddle. But I can kayak beside you. I'm OK with that.'

The next day, that is what they did. Diana waded into the water, her mind focused not on the dock, not on the memories that itched at the corners her of mind from her last time here, but on the present, in the moment. A shiver ran up her body; the water was cool but welcoming. She knelt down and reached out her arms, going under when she was deep enough to swim. Her mind calmed under the water, listening to the burble of her breath as she

blew it out, face emerging into the bright morning air. Aurelle was already waiting for her out on the lake in the kayak, the sun shining on the top of her head. *Hurry up!* Her voice rang out over the lake. Diana blinked water out of her eyes, and began to swim. Breast stroke at first until she reached Aurelle's kayak, then front crawl. Her long body pushed powerfully through the water, her muscles humming with the effort, her head turning with every breath.

Aurelle kept her going straight. She trained her eyes on the bright yellow of the kayak, listened for the sound of the paddle as it cut into the water. Her arms propelling her ahead. She was designed for this, seemed fit for this alone. This was her lake. Her head burst through the water and she saw the shore ahead, got a glimpse of the sign for RBU, its deep red paint. She trained her eyes on it, her breath coming in ragged gasps, her lungs burning. Faster and faster towards the school that she knew now Keith would never attend. Onward. Forward. *Hers*. She knew, in that moment, with Aurelle beside her, that they would go to RBU, that they would come here together.

'Come on, Martin!' Aurelle yelled, laughing. Her voice cut off as Diana went back under.

She swam to punish and to forgive herself. She swam for relief and retribution. The lake was her godless, fearsome church.

JANUARY, 1996. DIANA OPENED THE oven and pulled out a baking sheet of roasted fennel, eggplant, peppers, tomatoes, basil and capers. The room filled with the rich, wintery smell, and Aurelle sighed.

‘When will it be ready?’ She popped the end of a pepper in her mouth.

It was a Sunday night and Diana had suggested they invite Rachel over. Diana had encouraged the friendship between Aurelle and Rachel, breaking their rule to have no outsiders in their home, and it had been good for Aurelle. Rachel provided a distraction, allowed Diana to disappear into her work without feeling too guilty. Rachel was kind and easy, she loved art and books and she offered a good energy that Diana hoped would rub off on Aurelle. Diana didn’t think that Rachel particularly liked her, but that didn’t concern her much. Rachel had said things on occasion that implied she thought that Diana might be overbearing or controlling, or some nonsense. *Aurelle, why don’t you decide?* Rachel would say if they were choosing where to eat or what to do, pointedly ignoring Diana. Aurelle would look to Diana in those moments and Diana would stare at them both, challenging, as Aurelle’s cheeks grew red.

The girls planned on hunkering down together in the cottage: eating a homemade dinner, watching the snow come down in big, fluffy clumps outside. The weather people had issued a storm warning – a blizzard was coming. Classes likely closed the next day. Roads were hazardous. Diana had had the presence of mind to shop early in the morning for provisions. Rachel and Aurelle had made face masks and were both covered in a dried green sludge that they kept touching gingerly to see if it was ready to rinse. They had lounged around most of the day in PJs, embracing the sleepover theme. Diana had humored them, cooking most of the evening for a comfort-food feast, which was almost ready.

‘Soon,’ she said, wiping her forehead. She smiled at Aurelle. ‘You two can probably wash those off now.’ And they did, giggling like little girls in the bathroom, the sound ringing down the hallway.

Then, they were sitting with food in their laps, watching *Law & Order*, the enormous windows offering a bright evening sky, the snow obliterating the view across the lake.

‘It’s so beautiful here,’ Rachel murmured, as she put the last spoonful of Diana’s dinner into her mouth. ‘You know,’ she said, smiling, ‘I’m so glad I met you guys.’

Aurette laughed and raised a glass of red wine, ‘Hear, hear, sister!’

They stretched out on the large sectional couch together. Legs and arms. Contented smiles.

‘I got something else when I went out,’ Diana said, her mouth turning up just a bit.

‘Oh God, what did you do?’ Aurette shrieked, her eyes alight with possibility.

‘Ooh!’ Rachel clapped her hands. ‘Mysterious!’

Diana pulled out three tabs of acid, and hands reached out automatically.

‘Have you done it before?’ she asked Rachel, who nodded, smiling. ‘It’s the perfect night for it.’ They looked one another in the eyes and placed the tabs on their tongues. They clinked glasses and prepared for an evening of magic.

An hour later, they were outside. It was a warmish winter night, as is often the case during blizzards, and the sky was brighter than usual. The girls marveled at the sheer amount that had accumulated already: the car and the house were covered in a thick layer of fluffy snow. They kicked it into the air, threw it at each other, lay down in it.

‘It’s so calm,’ Diana said, feeling the pleasurable sensation of the cool ground under her warm jacket as they looked up at the sky, watching the snowflakes come towards them.

‘It’s like the beginning of *Star Wars*,’ Rachel said, reaching up with a mittened hand.

Aurette sat up, her cheeks red. ‘Let’s go to the lake!’

‘Mmm,’ Rachel mumbled, her hands wandering above her head.

Diana stood up, brushing her gloves down her long coat. She reached for Rachel as Aurette stood up and headed towards the dock. ‘Come on.’ She hoisted Rachel to her feet and they followed.

‘School will definitely be closed tomorrow,’ Aurette said. She pointed in the direction of the school, a white wall of snow. She plopped herself into one of the Adirondack chairs and the others followed suit. ‘It feels like we’re at the edge of the world.’

Rachel looked at Diana, then back up at the cottage. ‘I can’t believe you

grew up coming here.'

Diana nodded, saying nothing. She didn't spend much time on Rachel. She played a role, and that was as Aurelle's friend; keeping Aurelle busy. Diana herself didn't need more friends. She had Aurelle, and that was enough – even, lately, a little much. Rachel had none of the sparkle, none of the allure that Diana required in friendship. Rachel exchanged a look with Aurelle, who shrugged, giving away nothing. They turned their attention to the snow on the dock, sliding their feet through it, and laughing girlishly.

Diana looked at the snow-covered property where her parents, once energetic and engaged, had hired a crew to design and build a fire pit, an outdoor kitchen, a large deck and dock. Now, they sent the same crew to maintain it for Diana; they hadn't returned to the cottage since the day of Keith's death. When Diana had claimed the cottage as her own, they had seemed relieved – both that she wouldn't often return to her actual home, and that she had somewhere to be. She knew she was a reminder for them of their son, that she inflicted pain with every day she had the audacity to live, to get a little bit older. *He would be how old now, this would have been his birthday, he'd be doing this now.* It ran in Diana's mind like a ticker below her thoughts, constant. And this place, it had Keith all over it; it was for that reason she loved it, dominated it, conquered it. After all, if he hadn't died, none of this would have happened. Diana had always loved the dual side of pain and pleasure, enjoyed the ache of nostalgia or the reminders of loss, the remembrance of his cruelty and the fact that his death had forced her to live. It made her stronger, forced her to move forward. She had wished him dead in anger, thinking she could only be happy without him. But the fact was, that she wasn't without him. He was here, always here, and his memory spurred her on. She kept Keith close to her now, and their relationship as brother and sister had never been as strong when he was alive as it was now. Aurelle and Diana never spoke of Keith to Rachel or anyone else; he was a secret, a special thing that neither could dilute by speaking of aloud.

She closed her eyes, lifted her chin into the falling snow. The sounds of Aurelle and Rachel talking, laughing, washed over her as the acid high lifted her into her mind, expanded it, opened it like a split fruit. The remembering. The forgetting. She heard Rachel's voice. *Is she OK? She is so, like, serious, am I right?* There was more laughing, from both of them,

and it was at her expense. She blinked and breathed deeply. *No*. The piece of her that had been vulnerable to that in years past was a tough gristle now. She would feel nothing but the snow.

Later, Rachel read tarot cards for Aurelle while Diana lay on the couch smoking.

‘Do you have a question in mind?’ Rachel asked warmly. Rachel was not unlike the girls at their high school. The basic girls Aurelle had befriended prior to her friendship with Diana. Rachel was nice and uncomplicated, she had good taste in books and music. Friendship with her would be easy, and Aurelle slipped effortlessly into it.

Diana exhaled a plume of smoke.

‘Yes,’ said Aurelle.

‘Don’t tell me, though,’ Rachel said. ‘Keep it secret.’

‘I promise,’ Aurelle laughed. ‘Cross my heart.’

The cards were shuffled and the fates made their plans and Diana stubbed her cigarette out in a large glass ashtray. She examined the box the cards had come in. She liked the illustrations.

‘Want me to read yours next, Diana?’

Diana chuckled and said, ‘No, thank you for offering.’

‘Don’t believe in all this hooey?’ Aurelle chided her, nudging with her elbow.

‘On the contrary. But I like to have at least the illusion that I have some control over my destiny.’ She winked at Aurelle, who smiled gratefully and watched the cards eagerly as they were laid out in front of her, each more compelling and full of promise than the last. *The Fool. The Lovers. The Magician. The Fool.*

Spring was within their grasp, but winter, that magical minx, was holding on dearly. There was going to be an RBU-wide winter triathlon. It was being held by the Phys Ed department, and run by students and faculty who were tireless in their efforts to turn every seasonal lull into an opportunity for a competitive outdoor sport. The idea was that the triathlon would raise money for the rowing team in the spring, for some new boats or oars or some such; no one really knew. But it was early February at this point, and people were listless and cooped up, in need of some form of athleticism that could unite the winter-weary student body. People sat at tables in the

cafeteria calling out for donations and encouraging people to sign up.

‘What are the events?’ Rachel asked, as she, Diana and Aurelle carried lunch trays to a table one afternoon.

‘Skating, snowshoeing and shooting a target, I believe,’ said Diana, choosing a table near a set of windows.

‘You should do it,’ Aurelle said, biting into a celery stick then pointing it at Diana.

‘Why me?’

‘You’re obviously an athlete!’ Rachel laughed. She smiled at a student who was clanging a coffee tin and collecting money, and when he got to them, she threw a few coins into it.

‘Oh, she is,’ Aurelle said. ‘You should see her swim.’

Diana scowled, but Aurelle continued. ‘And we’d cheer you on, of course.’ Rachel nodded enthusiastically. Diana took a bite of her sandwich and chewed thoughtfully, watching the girls.

Diana herself had begun to feel an increasing pressure to be bigger, more. Going home at Christmas, visiting the empty Taylor house, she had returned to RBU with an urgency verging on desperation to prove herself, and was fearful it hadn’t been effective. She’d thrust herself wholeheartedly into her art and pushed her body to near-punishing extents in rowing and hiking to and from campus. She needed to do things worth noting, worth loving. Aurelle had no idea what it was to be left behind, didn’t understand the longing she felt, how desperate she was to earn a spot in that life.

She watched the Phys Ed students hamming it up with their snowshoes, trying to get students to sign up.

‘It happens on the morning of the art show,’ she said, shrugging. ‘I don’t think I’d have time to train properly. Also, I haven’t been on snowshoes in years.’

There was a big show at the end of the month for all of the first-year Fine Arts students. They had all proposed their exhibits and had been working on them for weeks. Diana thought of little else, spending all her time at the Den, sometimes sleeping on the couches there and not bothering to return to the cottage.

And now, the girls begging and cajoling, pleading with Diana to do this frivolous fun thing – a triathlon! They felt none of the pressure she did, she thought, watching their smiling faces. A steady stream of alcohol and drugs

– poppers and acid and E and coke – had peppered their weekends and, increasingly, their weeknights throughout the winter. Uppers were procured for schoolwork and downers to recover. Diana was the one who had sourced out the dealers among the student body, becoming notorious as one half of the pair of girls who *partied* and could spend for it. She worked the hardest, had real goals, took life seriously while Aurelle had not a care in the world. But looking at her face, and Rachel’s, she considered it. She thought of Keith, and how he would have loved an event like this, raising money for the rowing team. How obnoxious he’d have been, standing on tables and drumming up chaos in the process of recruiting other students. She could have beaten him at it, surprised all the frat boys and jocks. She could do it, battle Keith in her mind, as he would have been, like old times. She could put some distance between herself and Aurelle, who never appreciated opportunity or notoriety, didn’t care about victories or success. She looked at her friend, her smile goofy and girlish, her hair falling in her glassy eyes – *was she stoned right now?* – and a tiny pinprick of anger pulsed in her chest. Fun, for what it was worth, along with that old seductress: competition. *Be the best, Diana.*

‘Yes, fine, OK. I’ll do it,’ Diana said. And when she got up, pushing back her chair with a screech, heading for the sign-up table, Aurelle and Rachel clapped and cheered. Diana felt the familiarity of marching towards purpose and power.

AURELLE AND DIANA SPENT THE last year of high school turning ever inward, plotting and planning their future together, their great escape to RBU in summer 1995. They lay on the bed in Aurelle's room at the top of the house, the peaked roof making the ceiling slanted, and they thought of flying up and out. They loved their life with the Taylors, of course they did. Diana worshipped Marianne and considered herself a Taylor girl through and through. They were her family now.

Over the course of the past year, her own mother had disappeared from view. Mrs Martin slept all day. The cleaning lady worked around her. Opened curtains and windows to let fresh air in. Helen gratefully abandoned her daughter to the neighbours, so bottomless was her grief, so relieved was she that someone could distract her remaining child so she herself could sink ever deeper, distracting and numbing herself with a highly medicated social life combined with ever-lengthening periods of slumber. She would lie in a drug-induced dreamland and then drag herself out of bed, dress up, and go to charity events that would tire and sadden her, sending her back to her room. Friends came at first, but not much any longer. Mr Martin said she was suffering from exhaustion. He brushed hair from her forehead, then dressed for work and left again. Diana kissed her cheek and said *I'll be at the Taylors'. I'll be next door. Soon I'll be away at college, Mom. You don't have to worry about me.*

Aurelle knew this, knew her friend was essentially motherless, and she adopted her as a sister, as a better version of herself. She saw how much Diana wanted to go to university, to further her craft, her career as an artist, and she couldn't imagine life without her. She didn't feel that way about anything, not really. She didn't love anything as much as Diana did. She liked reading. She liked going on walks. She wondered if that was normal. If she was normal. Shouldn't she feel excited to learn things? It was intimidating to her, Diana's commitment, her urgent desire to improve as though she was running out of time. Aurelle watched her spend long hours talking to Marianne, heads together, referencing different artists who were making waves at the time. They dissected and agreed on and argued over the work of Damien Hirst and Liu Xiaodong; they watched and rewatched

Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*, with Aurelle sitting in the corner of the couch, shuddering. It gave her nightmares for a month. She was glad for Diana, that she had connected with Marianne. She knew Diana needed that.

But. Surely it was nothing. She sometimes felt adrift, unattached. She didn't think it was anyone's fault; she was sure it didn't really matter. She loved Diana. Diana made her feel anchored. Kept her from floating away. She doted on Aurelle and made her feel loved. She asked her opinion even when Aurelle was sure it wasn't important. Diana drew Aurelle in her sketchbook, which proved to Aurelle that she existed. She was there, there and there.

They continued to spend every day they could together once the school year started. Their last year of high school.

The girls from St John's who hadn't hung around the Taylor house over the summer had been surprised to see that Aurelle now went everywhere with someone they had never paid any attention to at all. Diana didn't care. Her cold stares and her unflappable demeanor seemed to provoke people, but she merely smiled and smoked and looked off into the middle distance before delivering some withering comment to whoever was trying to get under her skin. She couldn't give a shit what anyone other than Aurelle and her family thought. Her loyalty didn't stretch beyond them and so she was immune to the pressures and the insults of anyone else. No one else mattered. She was frozen and the only part of her heart that was warm was kept alive by Marianne and Aurelle. Like they had some magic spell on her, some means of accessing her, pumping blood through her veins. Everyone else was background.

When Diana said, 'I think we should apply to Rocky Barrens University,' Aurelle didn't hesitate. *Yes. Together.*

'My alma mater,' exclaimed Marianne, when they told her. 'Wow.'

She was standing at the kitchen counter, her hair in a ponytail, reading a recipe. Diana smiled widely and looked at Aurelle, who shrugged like she knew her mom would approve. Wheels in motion.

But later, when Diana was helping her parents with an errand, Marianne came and found Aurelle in her room.

'Knock-knock, honey,' she said, rapping on the open door. 'Can I come in?'

‘Sure,’ said Aurelle, putting down a *Jane* magazine she was reading. Her mother didn’t come up to her room often. All the action happened downstairs in their house. Marianne came in and sat on her bed. She took a deep breath and her face took on a sympathetic expression.

‘Listen, hon,’ she put her hand on Aurelle’s leg. ‘Do you... do you think it’s a good idea for you and Diana to go to the same school?’

‘What? Why? Why would you say that?’ Aurelle sat up. She felt rising panic.

‘Don’t get defensive, now. I just wonder. She spends so much time here. I mean, she basically lives here. It’s an awful lot of time to be together, and you don’t seem to see other friends. It might be nice for you two to... spend some time apart. Meet other people. It might be good for both of you.’

‘Why are you saying that? You’re the one who suggested we be friends in the first place.’

‘I know! I know that, hon. And I am so glad you are. I love Diana! She’s like a daughter to me. She is. She is...’ She paused. ‘It’s just... a suggestion. For both of you. There are so many schools out there, so much you could do. And of course, you know I’d love for you to work for me eventually. And I mean,’ she hesitated. ‘I have suggested you go to RBU before, remember, but you were never interested until Diana decided she wanted to go.’

Aurelle’s cheeks reddened. ‘No, Mom, I *really* want to go there. I know that now. It makes me so happy. I’d really fit in there.’ Aurelle didn’t know if this was true, but she wanted it to be, and she knew what her mother would want to hear.

Marianne considered her daughter, reaching out a hand and running it down her face. ‘Yeah?’ Aurelle nodded, a small smile forming. ‘That’s... that’s great, hon. It is a pretty special place.’

‘It really is. And I promise Diana and I will do our own things too,’ she said, smiling gamely now. ‘I’m excited!’ She may have been laying it on a bit thick, but Marianne smiled back at her.

‘I remember that feeling. Make sure it’s what *you* want, OK?’

Aurelle nodded, of course, absolutely.

‘Maybe you should consider living in residence, though? You can still go to school together, but then at least you’d meet other kids. Get the full experience.’

Aurette tried to picture Diana living alone at the cottage. Or worse, in residence. She shook her head fiercely. 'No. No, Mom, we're living at the cottage. We decided.'

Marianne stood up and brushed her hands down her long legs, nodding.

'Just think about it, OK? No need to decide anything now. We love you, honey. And we will support you no matter what. Just be sure it's your choice, not Diana's, right?'

She left, closing the door softly behind her.

Later, when Diana came back and was helping Marianne with dinner prep, talking animatedly with her about the school and the art program, Aurette watched them from the table. There was an artifice to her mother's kindness now. The casserole they had for dinner, which she had always loved, tasted fake, synthetic, a facsimile of something she'd loved. Her mother's smile was the same one she saw in glossy photographs, or when fans approached her on the street. It wasn't real. When Diana asked her what was wrong, she said she had cramps, and went to bed early, leaving Diana to stay up with Marianne, their chatter drifting up the stairs and into her mind as she dozed off, riddling her sleep with uneasy dreams.

AURELLE WASN'T DOING GREAT IN her college classes, but she was passing. She didn't want to flunk out, to have to return to Toronto, and so she did what she needed to do to stay at RBU – her home. Sometimes Rachel helped her with school. She'd give her a hand with essay structure, making connections. Aurelle did love the course material – the cottage was littered with her books – but she sometimes struggled to get her thoughts out on paper. She was also terrible at typing, and so Rachel would sit at Aurelle's desk and Aurelle would stretch out on her bed and they would pass a joint back and forth while Rachel clacked away, turning Aurelle's rambling thoughts into thesis statements and arguments.

Rachel and Diana were able to recover after their bingeing nights in a way that Aurelle could not, it seemed. It was fun for them, but neither of them lost themselves in it. Aurelle did exactly that – became increasingly lost and unsure if she wanted to return. Being drunk or high made her feel normal, and that was her sweet spot. She never knew when a question about her family would come, but if she was high, it didn't bother her in the same way. She could throw off questions about Marianne Taylor by skipping out onto the dancefloor or making out with whoever was asking. She could just be that girl: fun, normal, average, open to anything. It was always Aurelle who had to be dragged home from parties, who never wanted the nights to end. She had, it was clear, an addictive personality: she thrived on more and never saw the line that moved into too much, crossing it happily, daring it to move a little farther next time.

Diana knew this, and watched Aurelle with detached curiosity. She never told Aurelle what to do or how to behave. She rarely tried to rein her in. *She really can't hold her booze*, people would observe aloud, watching Diana for a reaction. But Diana wouldn't take the bait, would ignore them or tell them that Aurelle knew what she was doing. *She's a big girl*, she would say, butting out a cigarette and pulling her coat around her. *She's no different to anyone else here*. That was true, but only because Aurelle refused to be different, refused to take what was offered to her. If she was with Aurelle, Diana kept watch, ensuring no harm could come to her, her own tall frame, her stoic expression a kind of specter against the backdrops of the RBU

parties. She tried to make sure she located Aurelle at the end of every night, if she could. She worked until the last possible moment at the Den before she would stalk into the night, moving through the trees in the darkness, always at last finding Aurelle dancing or talking or stumbling through a doorway. There to catch her before she fell.

Diana had been spending more and more time outside the cottage, knowing that if she could just get through this period, if she could prove herself, best everyone else, she could rise and be at ease. Between the upcoming art show and the triathlon, it felt like she and Aurelle only saw each other in passing or when the stars aligned and Diana succeeded in finding Aurelle at a party. They left notes for each other, and sometimes Aurelle would visit Diana at the Art Den, where she could be found sketching furiously, stretching canvases, working out a paint colour. She would jolt into recognition, relieved to see Aurelle, but too busy to talk, to visit, promising they'd catch up later. She had taken to jogging between the campus and the cottage, which, there and back, was approximately the distance she'd be running in the triathlon. She'd arrive at the cottage sweaty and gasping, her face red, and Aurelle would hand her a drink, offer her a plate of food and fill her in on their social agenda. More and more often it felt like there was a gulf between them, but Diana was single-mindedly focused on her work.

'OK, love you!' Aurelle said one day, leaving Diana at the studio, headed out to find something to eat, art students' eyes following her as she left.

At the pub, the bored student server said, 'One?'

'Yep, just me,' Aurelle replied.

It was often just her. People treated her differently these days. They paid her both more and less attention now that they all knew who she was. They pointedly ignored her when she tried to make eye contact. It was so hard to make new friends when her name came before her personality.

Marianne called regularly, and Aurelle never answered the phone in case it was her. She didn't want to talk, didn't want to think of her home away from RBU, their lives as *the Taylors*. She had recently found herself in this no-man's-land, between lives, and was afraid her mother would sense her unhappiness and try unsuccessfully to make her feel better. *Tell her I'm not here*, Aurelle would say, if Diana was home; if not, she would let it ring, listening later to her mother's voice on the machine: *Love you, girls, hope*

all is well! When Diana answered, she would brighten, saying how glad she was that Marianne called. *No, Aurelle's at class*, she'd say, pausing to give Aurelle a reproachful look. Then she would sink into a chair and launch into a conversation about art: what she was reading or watching, about how she was still unsure about her work for the upcoming show, nodding and listening avidly as Marianne responded. Aurelle would drift into another room, Diana's voice a muted comfort as she would light a joint and lie down, letting her body melt away. She didn't know what was wrong. Didn't want to talk about it. Didn't want to talk at all.

Diana had forgotten how much she loved pushing her body in exercise. As an art student, she didn't normally cross paths with the athletes, and joining the triathlon had pushed her out of her comfort zone and into one where everyone wore spandex and warm-up jackets. She had taken to joining some of their training sessions, mostly to remind her body about skating and snowshoeing. She recognized these types of people – they would have been Keith's athletic peers. She had grown up around people like them, hating them at the time, determined to do better than them all, but found their frank and uncomplicated physical ambition refreshing now. They talked about MBI and calories and personal bests.

'OK, go!' someone would shout, and all of the participants would take off from the banks of the icy lake, skating towards the far end in unison, laughing and trash-talking, panting and falling down. Diana's long legs made her a natural, and she easily out-skated many of the Phys Ed students, who hollered at her as her skates carved through the rough ice, over bumps and rough patches. *We have a cottage beside a lake*, her parents had said. *You have to learn to swim and skate*. And she had, her naturally competitive nature pushing her to excel, to be the best skater in her Learn to Skate group, to achieve her Bronze Medallion in swimming and be certified as a lifeguard. When she wanted to be the best, she was.

Someone always had a stereo at the shore and rock echoed strangely over the frozen lake while they skated: The Tragically Hip, Green Day, Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers. Diana wore a toque tight over her ears, and her now long, dirty-blonde hair flew out behind her. She once again reveled in the blankness of fitness, the sheer physicality that drove introspection from the mind.

There was a shooting aspect to the final race, and so they sometimes practiced with a BB gun one of the guys brought, setting up targets and lying in the snow to shoot. Diana found this thrilling, by far and away her favourite part of training, and she went as far as to dig out a gun she knew was stored away in the cottage. Some evenings, while Aurelle and Rachel watched from the balcony, she tested her skills, shooting cans she'd set up on rocks. The sound when the bullets struck the cans echoed loudly through the trees.

The snowshoeing was less exposing to the wind and sun because of the shelter of the trees; more sweat, more huffing and puffing, and Diana enjoyed it the least. She felt constantly thirsty, and her legs seared with the effort of getting through the woods, but she pushed herself. She would accept nothing less than being the best. Opening her jacket, unwinding her scarf, she would think of the Taylors, she would hope that Marianne had gotten her letters, carefully crafted notes about design or art she was reading up on, about assignments and studies she was doing in the studio. She loved Aurelle, but she knew she had bested her as well, that she was the honorary Taylor daughter who was actually living up to her potential rather than squandering it. She could forgive Aurelle's denial of her dynasty in the moments when she could see her own future, that tantalizing thing glistening just out of reach. It was Diana's to lose. It was Diana's to win.

The Phys Ed students always finished their training days with beer out in the snow. And while she knew they thought her just as strange as most people did, they always invited her to join them. She smiled and politely declined, and they told her she was a shoe-in for a place, and someone always lifted a snowshoe, and someone else hit them with a snowball. She would laugh and return to the Art Den, exhausted but inspired. Over and over, repeat.

'I need some pick-me-ups,' she told Kyle Litfield, her regular dealer one afternoon, handing him a large mittful of cash. She was pushing her body to the point of exhaustion and needed something to get her through, give her more energy and a sharp mind. She'd knocked on the door of his room in Segwun and he'd let her in, closing the door behind her. He was stoned, and he rubbed his eyes, stared bleary-eyed at Diana.

'OK, Stretch,' he said, opening up the bottom drawer of his standard RBU

desk and rifling through some file folders in which he kept his drugs. 'Lemme see what I can hook you up with...'

She looked around his room at the posters for various bands, at his overflowing ashtrays. 'You might want to open a window in here,' she mused. 'Or, you know, clean it up a bit.'

He looked up at her and laughed huskily. 'Yeah, yeah.' He paused, assessing her. 'You know, you're a bit of a surprise, Stretch.'

She nodded. She knew people thought this. She knew she wasn't like his other customers or friends. She couldn't imagine living on this floor, in this residence. She didn't respond. Kyle handed her an envelope and took her large fold of cash. 'Here's an assortment,' he said.

'Thank you.' Diana turned to leave.

'Hey,' he said, smiling. 'Why don't you stay? We can sample it together. I have some other stuff you might get into.'

Diana sniffed and looked around his room again. 'No thanks.' She turned and closed the door behind her, hearing him mutter the words *weird bitch* while snapping on his lighter.

She was exhausted from training, from working at the studio the night before, and wanted a nap, but needed to stay awake. Her class had done a critique – 'crit' – session last week, and while she was normally the star talent, easily, in the class critiques, this time Simon had unveiled plans for a high-concept piece he was working on for the show, and the faculty and students had fawned over it and him. It was essentially a large box. In it was some combination of childhood toys and relics of his sexual conquests, creating an overall effect that people had called *daring* and *nostalgic* and *uncomfortable*, but that Diana thought was trite and derivative. She had not said so. People had tired of the excellence with which she rendered real life, real people. They wanted more. Her planned contributions to the show were paintings based on old sketches she'd done of the Taylor family from the window of her room; they were, in essence, distant portraits of a family. The faculty had been courteous in the session, offering bland suggestions. Grace had been quiet, which Diana interpreted as disappointment, or worse, dismissal of her potential. Later, Diana had tried to catch Grace's eye, wondering if they might at least have a conversation, at most a walk around the campus, but Grace had pointedly moved past her, giving her a brief nod and closing the door of her studio behind her.

After this, Diana went into one of the small bathrooms off of the painting studio with a large, hardcover *Abstract Expressionism* textbook under her arm. She opened the envelope Kyle had given her and lay out a line of coke on the book. She inhaled deeply, lifting her head and wiping her nose, her mind becoming immediately bright with clarity and purpose, firing on jealousy and artificial energy. She needed to do something different, she knew, something to eclipse the other work being shown. Something to surprise and get people talking. She returned to her workspace and stood before her easel, the flicker of an idea on the verge of becoming. She had doubts, though; wasn't sure if she should dare. She thought of Grace, whose attention had waned, who seemed to have misjudged Diana's talent, and now saw her as average, uninteresting. Grace, who had said *be untamed*.

It was around seven pm by the time she was hungry enough to leave the studio. It had filled up with other artists, and she had tired of their chatter about the show, about Simon's work. They largely ignored her, so she was able to slip out easily, the cold air and the darkness outside a welcome reprieve from the hours of intense focus.

When she got back to the cottage, she discovered it was empty. There was a note from Aurelle on the counter, her loopy handwriting announcing that she was headed to a party at Segwun and that Diana should meet her there. *Bring some party supplies!* Followed by hearts and x's and o's. Diana ate cold pizza from the fridge and poured herself some wine from a half-empty bottle on the counter. She did some more coke. She turned on the stereo and brought out her sketchbook, ready to return to perfecting her skills. There was a heap of unfolded laundry on the couch, so she began to draw that, her mind bending with the lush folds of the fabric. The phone rang.

Later, she would wonder why she did it. Maybe it was the drugs. It probably was, she conceded. But there was something else, too. Drugs, of course, only ever brought out what was already there. Like the coin and leaf rubbings they did as children. Showing what was underneath. Diana hated being caught unawares. Would never be made the fool.

'Hello?' she answered, and she heard that her voice sounded higher than usual, probably from not speaking aloud for hours.

'Aurelle, honey?' It was Marianne. 'Oh! Finally! I never get you at home, darling.' A beat, a pause, while Diana prepared to correct her, then: 'I was preparing myself for another in a series of endless art talks with Diana!' Her

voice crackled with light laughter.

Diana started, stunned, her eyes brimming quickly. She had hardly a heartbreaking second to decide, but suddenly she did. In an instant, her body took on Aurelle's; she hunched her shoulders slightly, putting her hair behind her ear, allowing herself a small smile, even as her heart was breaking. 'Hi, Mom,' she said in Aurelle's voice. 'Yeah, I, um, I know, I guess I've been busy.'

'Well, that's what you're there for, right?'

And Diana and Marianne talked, they caught up, Marianne told her how the family was doing, how the other Taylor kids were, about her work and Aurelle's father, and she asked so many questions. Questions she never asked Diana, who stood, tears streaming down her face. There was so much deep love and interest and concern for Aurelle. No platitudes, which Diana now saw, with a searing pain, was all Marianne had ever given her. All this time. And Aurelle must have known. Known that her friend was only ever that, a friend. A girl next door.

'And how's Diana?' Marianne finally asked.

'Oh,' Diana coughed out. 'Good. She's really good.'

'Uh huh. Is she giving you enough space to do your own thing?'

Diana paused, caught her breath. 'What?'

'Don't get defensive, hon. You know how I feel. We've talked about it before.' She took Diana's silence as a response and continued. 'Look, I just want to make sure you're living your own life, that she's not, you know, taking over. She has a tendency to... Well, she's got an intense personality, is all.' She changed tack: 'Are you keeping up alright in your classes?'

'What do you mean?' Diana whispered.

'Hang on—' she heard Marianne cover the phone and call something to Mitch. 'Sorry, hon, your dad's just asking—' she sighed, chuckling. 'He wants to know if you want our toaster oven.' She laughed. 'I don't know what gets into him. No, Mitch, the girls don't need that.'

'What did you mean, about Diana?' Diana asked again.

Marianne sighed. 'Nothing, hon, just making sure you stay you. She's an intense girl. We've talked about it before, you know how I feel. What you were telling me at Christmas; just how driven she is. I just don't want you getting driven over!' She chuckled. 'You know. This isn't news. I find it hard to even get a word in with her myself. I've been trying to find a way to

tell her I won't be going to her show, but she never gives me a chance! She forgets that the world doesn't revolve around her, poor girl.' She laughed lightly. It was nothing to her. Diana was nothing.

'Right,' Diana choked out. 'Look, I gotta go, Mom. Someone's at the door.'

'OK, hon. I love you! Call soon, OK?'

Diana hung up and sunk into the couch, her sketchbook falling to the floor. She cried, then, in great shuddering gulps. This feeling – it was grief. She recognized it. Her head pounded. She waited it out and, after some time, took deep breaths. And when she lifted her head, wiped her nose, she felt her anguish had morphed into its twin: fury. She picked up a glass candle holder from the coffee table and hurled it across the room, shattering a mirror. It reflected her rage back at her in so many pieces on the floor.

She grabbed her coat from the closet and, slamming the front door behind her, got in her car and sped through the gravel roads, back to the studio.

IT WAS THE DAY: THE triathlon and the art show. Rachel and Aurelle had made signs to cheer Diana on during the race, and would then be seeing her at the Den.

‘I’ll be glad when this is all over,’ Aurelle said. ‘She needs a break. I haven’t even seen her at all lately.’

‘Yeah, no kidding,’ Rachel said, and although part of her had enjoyed her time with just Aurelle, she knew the balance was off. The past couple of weeks had taken a turn. Aurelle was becoming despondent, quiet, worrying about Diana and sinking into a fog. Diana had virtually disappeared into training for the race and prepping for the show, and Rachel knew that Aurelle wasn’t the same without her friend. She drank and got high so much that she seemed like she was in a race for oblivion, and Rachel suspected that, without Diana to anchor her, she felt a bit lost.

When Diana did come home, she was quiet and sullen, and Aurelle would often go to her door and knock quietly, asking if she could come in, only to be rebuffed.

‘She won’t show me what she’s working on,’ Aurelle said the other day, sulkily. ‘When I go to the Den, she, like, covers up her work. She’s never done that before.’

Rachel was trying on some of Aurelle’s MT clothes. She loved borrowing them, going to Milk – a regular weekly rave at the old dining hall. DJs working at large, fold-out tables while lights and smoke filled the hall, their music pounding to a deafening pitch, students drenched in sweat from dancing. High, happy, young. Aurelle usually went with her, but it wasn’t the same without Diana: Aurelle tended to sit in the corners and smoke weed, take E or poppers rather than dance with Rachel.

‘Maybe she wants it to be a surprise,’ Rachel said, looking from her reflection into Aurelle’s face, which was pale and thin.

‘I feel like she’s not telling me something...’ Aurelle said, drifting over to her bed. ‘There are shoes with that same design if you want to try them on.’ She looked at Rachel, her rosy cheeks, her long hair shining down her back, her friend who glowed with the realness of life, but without the sparkle.

With their *Go, Diana!* signs in hand, Rachel and Aurelle got into Diana's car and headed to campus before the triathlon started, the wheels crunching on the packed snow covering the narrow cottage roads. Rachel sat in the passenger seat, warm in her ski jacket, and stared out at the frozen wilderness around them. There were sign posts for the triathletes at crossroads, and people had started to gather in lawn chairs along the route as they got closer to the starting point. She turned to Aurelle, who was easing the car into a spot in the student parking lot.

'Was Diana always like this?'

Aurelle looked at her, surprised. She turned the car off, and sat for a moment.

'What do you mean?'

'I dunno,' she shrugged. 'Just so—' She made a face, bugging her eyes. 'Intense, ambitious. Like, as a kid.'

Aurelle paused. 'I dunno. We weren't friends then.'

'Don't – Didn't you live next to each other?' Rachel asked, as they took their signs out of the backseat and began crunching through the snow towards the starting line for the race. There were crowds of people gathering, laughing, selling hot chocolate. People smoked and stomped their feet.

'Yeah, but I never got to know her when we were kids. Her family was... I dunno, a bit strange.'

'Really?' Rachel said, looking interested.

Aurelle felt guilty for this and backtracked. 'No, not strange. Kind of... reserved.' She dodged some people who were racing past. 'I knew her brother a bit.' Aurelle remembered that there was a kind of unspoken rule not to discuss Keith, even if it did feel good just to be chatting with a regular friend, someone who wasn't so, as Rachel said, intense.

'What was he like?' Rachel asked. Aurelle didn't like how gossipy this suddenly felt. She stopped, catching her breath. The cold air, along with carrying the signs, had tired her out. She turned to face Rachel. 'Well, *he* wasn't reserved, that's for sure. But, you know, he was just her brother. They weren't close.'

I hated him, Diana had said. Aurelle pushed this thought away as Rachel made a sympathetic face. 'Still, he *died*. That's gotta screw a person up, right?'

Aurette smiled tightly in response. ‘We should get going. We don’t want to miss the start.’

The participants were corralled in a roped-off area where they were stretching and chatting, numbers pinned to their jackets. Rachel looked across the crowd for Diana, and found her easily. She had just stood up from a stretch, her long neck and graceful posture putting her literally head and shoulders above the others. Diana turned, then, and looked at Aurette. Their eyes locked, and Aurette was reminded, for that brief moment, of the day she and Diana became friends. She swallowed now, put a smile on her face, and waved. Diana turned away, lifting a long arm over her head, pulling her elbow into a stretch, disappearing into the crowd.

Aurette’s chin dropped, her shoulders sagged. She felt small: she was alone, like she was back home when her heart was broken and she had no one. Why was Diana pulling away from her like this? Was it more than the demands of the art show? Rachel grabbed her arm and tugged her to the starting line, where people were handing out hot chocolate and talking about the final event, which was shooting a beer can with a BB gun from standing, from the knees and lying down. Someone passed Aurette a flask, laughing merrily, and it sounded menacing in her ears. She numbly poured a good portion into her own cup, handing it back. She tipped the searing liquid down her throat and closed her eyes, loving the feeling, the anticipation of its numbing effects. A gun fired and Rachel bounced up and down beside her, cheering.

‘Diana!’ She screamed, her hands cupped around her mouth. ‘Go, Diana, GO!’

Aurette watched the throng of triathletes make their way through the snow in their snowshoes, their faces set in determined grimaces. And there was Diana, her Diana, who didn’t want her anymore, who couldn’t protect her or care for her if she was gone. She guessed, when she thought about it, that Diana had outgrown her. It made sense. Aurette wanted a small life. Diana’s dreams were bigger than this. Her life was her art, she had a serious purpose, while Aurette simply had a serious drug habit and no real ambition. She drank the rest of her cup and got another.

‘Come on, let’s go to the next check point!’ Rachel said, pulling her through the trees towards the lake. The athletes had disappeared into the

woods and would emerge at the shore.

Rachel, Aurelle thought, sweet Rachel, who had brought some bright distraction into their lives, who was kind and uncomplicated. Aurelle smiled weakly and followed her along to the shore where soon a few snowshoers, including Diana, arrived to cheers and applause, flopping down where they were to take off their snowshoes and put on their skates. Aurelle watched her, thinking about when they used to canoe here together, only a few short months ago, and suddenly she found herself scream along with Rachel, 'You can do it, Diana!' Her voice was hoarse with a hidden sob. Diana looked over at her, then stood up, her arms out for balance, as she made her way over the bank of snow and onto the frozen lake. She was one of the first to launch outward, her long legs putting her quickly ahead. Rachel hugged Aurelle tightly, laughing. Aurelle reached into her pocket and pulled out a thick joint she'd rolled the day before. She lit it, and inhaled deeply, watching Diana's receding body, her hair a cape behind her, her arms working gracefully, her body disappearing. Always disappearing. She coughed, tears running down her cheeks, and handed it to Rachel, who put her arm around her, and pointed across the lake. *Look! Look at her go!* And she did: she watched her go.

Diana felt the icy wind on her cheeks and pulled her hat down low to cover her ears. Her skates carved across the ice, making a deep, sharp sound, a rhythm. She stared at the flags placed strategically to guide the athletes, watched the people who were just ahead of her, and pumped her legs. The pain was good. She was clear-minded. Focused. She'd done a line of coke right before the race started, feeling the sharp clarity immediately, loving the intensity, the way her mind narrowed in a cone-like focus, pushing everything else out except the immediate present.

She had stayed up most of the night working at the Den, mounting her pieces for the show, covering them carefully so no one would see them until that night. She had no doubt of their power. They were perfect. She had risen. After hanging the paintings she had driven home in the early hours and slept for a tiny window before hiking back to campus for the race. She woke ready. She was born ready. She may have lost track for a while, but she remembered now: how effective she was, how powerful she could be if she just kept her eyes ahead.

She passed two people, pushing herself into the lead. Her body was fire. It was purpose. She could be better, be more, she could take her rightful place. She would win.

Aurette was well-numbed with alcohol and weed by the time Diana emerged from the forest the clear winner, her face glazed with sweat, her hair soaking. Aurette heard someone say, *isn't that that rich girl? Like, the heiress?* And she didn't turn to see if they were talking about her or about Diana. *Who cares*, she thought. *I wish she was me. She'd be better at it.*

They were in a crowded clump with other spectators. Some guy handed Diana a BB gun, and was pointing at a small beer can propped up on a tree stump. Aurette watched as her friend, her heart, lifted the gun onto her shoulder, closed one eye, and shot. The can flew off the stump and everyone cheered. *Down on your knees now*, the guy said as someone replaced the can. In response, someone else screamed, *That's What He Said!* Diana crouched, took aim, and fired again, the crowd going wild. Everyone jumping around beside Aurette. Aurette's eyes squinting against the fog of her mind. She watched Diana lie down now, her long legs out behind her, other participants crowded around, everyone gasping and laughing. The can was replaced on the stump. *Once more now, and you win.* Diana lined it up, propped up her arm. There was some shushing among the spectators. Then, keeping the gun trained on the can, Diana turned and found Aurette in the crowd. She held Aurette's gaze with her cold eyes.

She fired.

S TRAIGHT AFTER THE TRIATHLON, RACHEL and Aurelle were in a bathroom at the grad pub, getting changed for the art opening. They had put dresses in their knapsacks in the morning, which felt like an eternity ago. Rachel looked carefully at Aurelle, who had pulled her dress over her head – a slim-fitting, vintage-y thing in emerald green that set off her pale skin. She'd left the back hanging open while she angrily swiped lip gloss over her mouth, unable to find her signature red lipstick at the house, barely looking at her reflection now.

'Here – let me,' Rachel said, zipping the dress up. 'Hey, are you OK?'

Aurelle hardly seemed to notice her. She shook her head, trying to make sense of it for the umpteenth time. 'I mean, I'm not imagining it, right? She fired that gun while she was looking right at me. Like she was sending a message. It was... scary. I just – I just don't understand.'

Rachel had been hearing some version of this for the past two hours, right through dinner, which Aurelle had hardly touched. A girl came out of a stall now and looked at them, a scandalized look on her face. Rachel moved so she could wash her hands.

'Well,' she said, both for Aurelle and the stranger's benefit. 'It was just a BB gun...'

'It was symbolic,' Aurelle snapped with uncharacteristic fire, glaring at the girl, who hurried out of the bathroom.

Rachel sighed. 'You look so pretty,' she said, and her voice sounded hollow. Aurelle rolled her eyes, so Rachel turned away from her. She fussed over her own dress, a scarlet wrap, and ran a brush through her hair.

'We're going to put our jackets and hats and boots on anyway, so it doesn't even matter how we look,' Aurelle grumbled. They looked at their reflections one last time, standing at the sinks, and proceeded to bundle up again to face the elements.

'Well,' Rachel said, looking confused. 'I thought you wanted to dress up for Diana.'

'She doesn't need us,' Aurelle said darkly.

By the time they arrived at the Den, the show was in full-swing. A long-

haired student with mutton chops, wearing a faded top hat and a baby blue tuxedo, was taking coats, adding them to an ever-growing heap of damp winter clothes with a smile as people moved into the gallery space itself. Rachel and Aurelle had also packed fancy shoes, and they held each other's shoulders for balance as they put them on, avoiding the puddles of melted snow on the floor. Aurelle stumbled immediately, and Rachel offered her an elbow to keep her straight.

The gallery space in the Den was large. Four studio rooms had been converted into a show space for the purpose of the night. The walls had been slapped with white paint, the ceiling lights angled at the pieces on the walls and floors. A girl in a black, puffy, prom-style dress offered glasses of punch on a tray. Aurelle took two, didn't hand one to Rachel, and began drinking from each, alternating hands as she glowered around the first room. A record player in the corner played The Smiths while two students rifled through the pile of records in the crate beside it, choosing what would go on next.

Aurelle took very little notice of the work of the other students: the self-indulgent sculptures; the incomprehensible thought-pieces; so many paintings of the lake. There was a small group around an installation piece, which appeared to be a large box that people were going into and emerging out of, smiling confusedly. *It's different*, she heard one girl chirp. *No it isn't*, Aurelle thought, cruelly, knowing, from growing up around her mother, from listening to Diana, that it was likely a work of masturbation. Quite possibly literally, she considered, wondering if there was a guy in the box jerking off. She pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her purse and lit one, enjoying the momentary flush of dizziness as she inhaled. *So. Where is she?*

Diana was indestructible. She was wearing tailored navy pants and a matching fitted jacket with a shirt underneath. Her hair was parted on the side and brushed straight across, sleek and shiny. She wore red lipstick that she had taken from Aurelle's makeup bag. She looked sexy and intimidating, and inside she felt calm, powerful. She stood near her paintings, which had attracted a large crowd, her chin out, shoulders back, murmuring thanks to the many people eager to praise her on the works' social commentary, on the mastery of the portraiture. There were three in total, all five feet high. Diana had removed the coverings, which she knew

her classmates had found pretentious, directly before the doors opened. Their eye-rolling had ceased immediately, replaced by gasps.

Grace came and stood at her side.

‘You did it, Diana,’ she said, a small smile on her face. She looked at the paintings appraisingly. ‘I wasn’t sure you could. But you have shown yourself to be quite fearless. I’m very impressed.’ She sipped her drink. ‘Come see me in my studio soon. There are things to discuss.’ She raised her glass and moved away to talk to her fellow professors. Diana glowed: triumph.

Then she waited.

Aurette rounded the corner into the room, nearly toppling on her heels, took one quick look, and saw. She saw all of it at once, her mind racing to catch up as she walked slowly towards Diana and the paintings. There was a crowd in front of them, and Diana nearby, watching Aurette. Aurette was dimly aware of the change in Diana’s appearance, and she heard someone ask the person beside them: *Is that her...? From the paintings?*

It was: Aurette, on the canvas. All three. Each was entitled *Girl*, with a date. She stared at herself as a teenaged princess. High collar, crushed velvet bodice, full skirt. Her own cheeks reddened looking at her painted face: rouged, lips bright red. A fool. A whore. Garish. Her face cruel and stern. On her head a crown, a small MT logo visible in the center. She held a scepter in her left hand that was topped with a velvet, stuffed, heart-shaped cushion in rich purple. Under the scepter, crushed by it, was a real heart. It was mangled, its blood oozing across the floor, under her gown; it appeared almost to beat, to throb under the piercing weight of the scepter.

The second painting was of the same young royal, her face a grotesque grimace of laughter or tears, her makeup smeared, vomit trickling from her lips into a puddle beneath her. She was in the woods, she held a birch tree for support as she leaned over, the bodice of her gown torn and showing a lacy bra beneath, the hem of her dress filthy, a cigarette in her hand. Her hair had come unpinned and her crown was askew. This was Aurette any night of the week, she knew. Diana had taken this weakness and rendered it in oils.

The third painting depicted Aurette passed out in her bed, curled up, knees bent, mouth lolling. She held her old teddy bear, Darling, the one she’d

brought from home. Her hair was matted and covered in pine needles and burrs, mascara making a trail of black tears down her cheeks. Her crown on the carpet. She wore a sheer nightgown, hiked up around her knees. On the bed was a small, dark-haired dog, tail wagging, sniffing her ass.

Aurette took all of this in, and she was aware that the room was watching her. She saw, somewhere, Diana's hand lift a cigarette to her mouth and then exhale smoke rings up into the lights. Aurette's heart slammed against her chest. All eyes on her. All eyes. She tipped her head back and finished off first one drink, then the other. Someone laughed nearby. Her chest felt tight in her dress, her breath coming in gasps. *Diana did this*. Diana took this, her little life, her darkest fear that all she was, in the end, was a spoiled princess out for a good time. She lifted her feet out of her uncomfortable shoes, feeling smaller but immediately relieved, almost falling, but no one was there to grab onto. She turned, unsteadily, pushing quickly through the hot, close, staring crowd, which widened for her, and bursting out onto the deck of the Den, where several students gathered drinking and smoking. She grabbed the railing and leaned over; she retched, her vomit making a loud splat as it hit the melting snow below.

Someone nearby chuckled and said, 'A bit on the nose, don't you think?' The doors opened and closed and the energy returned to the party. Rachel rushed out, offering a gentle hug, some supportive words, all of it like a dim fog from a dream to Aurette. Diana didn't come. She stayed inside, feted and celebrated, the talk of the night.

And Aurette held on in the dark, gripping the wooden railing, tasting the bitterness of betrayal and humiliation on her tongue, on her teeth.

PART III

‘**Y**OU THINK I’M A PRINCESS?’ Aurelle cried later, for the umpteenth time.

‘You take everything so literally,’ Diana scoffed, smoking. Her lipstick had faded, but her eyes shone. She had just had the best night of her life. Aurelle’s reaction was collateral damage. ‘Honestly, Aurelle, you’ve got the subtlety of a blunt axe. Art is about nuance sometimes; it’s not all about what you see straight ahead of you. Besides, I’ve been drawing you for years. It’s never bothered you before. The opposite, I would wager. I know you deny it, but admit that you love being the star.’

Aurelle put her hands over her face. ‘No! How could you do this to me? Don’t you love me at all anymore?’

Diana stood still. She said, coldly, ‘You’re drunk.’

Aurelle sat down, confused, snot running down her face. She was drunk, it was true. Her shoulders sagged. ‘You made me look like a fool.’

‘Art is holding up a mirror.’

Aurelle took a breath, opened her mouth, but then shut it. She nodded. Diana was right. She always was. She couldn’t fight her. She wasn’t smart enough, not strong enough. She needed Diana in her corner, not at the other side of the ring. So she was in a frame again, just like she was with the cherry tee, just like always. She sighed. At least she knew how to be a subject. The thought of her mother made her eyes widen. ‘This will be terrible for my mom. Imagine how it will look!’ She looked at Diana, frantic again. ‘How could you do this to her, as well?’

Diana let out a low laugh and looked out the window. ‘Oh, please. Marianne will be just fine.’

Aurelle put her head back, sighing. ‘What did I do to you, Diana?’

Diana said nothing.

‘I know there’s something. I know you, I know us better than anyone. Tell me.’

Diana thought of the phone call with Marianne. She felt a stab of hurt pride, of embarrassment that solidified, almost immediately, into purpose. For a moment, she considered telling Aurelle, releasing it. *No*. She pushed it down, but she would never be caught unawares again.

‘Nothing,’ she said. She took a drag of her cigarette, and, blowing out smoke, said, ‘This is art. It’s not about you.’ She poured a large glass of wine and handed it to Aurelle, who hesitated, then relented, reaching for it. She brought it to her lips quickly, a dark red droplet falling to the carpet.

By the time Aurelle got up the next day, looking like a rosy-cheeked child after a feverish night, the phone calls had begun. Word of Diana’s paintings had made its way to local media in the area, but, more importantly, to people who followed Marianne Taylor’s designs and her life – people in the city, to start. Grace had already put in a phone call to some art agents and critics, who wanted to come and see the paintings, to meet Diana and maybe Aurelle, too.

Marianne called. Aurelle answered.

‘What is all this about Diana’s paintings of you in different stages of debauchery? Vomiting?’ She demanded immediately in an uncharacteristically hard voice.

‘It’s fine, Mom.’ She looked at Diana, who lifted her chin, her mouth set in a line. Ready. ‘It’s art. It’s not really about me.’ Her voice was weak, thin. She paused, listening. ‘Yes,’ she said, her eyes locked on Diana’s. ‘I knew. Of course. She wouldn’t do that without telling me.’ She looked down, nodded her head, silent, chagrined. Soon she looked at Diana and mouthed, *She wants to talk to you.*

Diana turned, and headed to her room.

Over her shoulder, she said, ‘I’m busy,’ and closed the door behind her.

THE FOLLOWING DAYS WERE UNSEASONABLY warm, the sun melting everything in its wake. It seemed impossible that the triathlon had only just taken place. Spring was on its way, the birds more vocal than they had been in some time. Soon the lake would be thawed, and no one would be skating on it. Diana's car moved through the melting snow like a knife through butter as she and Aurelle left the cottage together. It was only a few days since the art show, but something momentous had shifted.

Waiting for Diana and Aurelle at the Art Den was a woman in a black jacket and jeans, sporting banged-up work boots and shaggy, messy hair. Everything she wore was curated. Her name was Tracy and she ran a gallery in Toronto's Queen West, and she had called Diana and asked to come and see the paintings.

'Maybe Aurelle Taylor could come too?' she'd said.

Aurelle wanted things to return to normal, to feel safe and loved in their home together. If she agreed to participate, perhaps Diana's fearsome chill would thaw, and maybe they could move forward. She'd agreed, with a nod, and Diana rewarded her with a warm smile, and returned to the phone call.

There were already a number of students at the Den, milling about, smoking and drinking coffee, working. There were plastic glasses littered across the floor and on tables, as was often the case. People groaning about hangovers, telling stories, all surreptitiously looking at Diana and Aurelle, at the woman who was with them. Diana walked Tracy through the studio spaces. Aurelle hung back a little, chewing on a fingernail.

The paintings, which had been taken down and were now leaning against a wall in Diana's workspace, had lost nothing of their shine. They were striking, haunting. Aurelle stared at the depictions of herself, at the shrieking mouth, the sleeping eyes, the white lies, the dark truth. She felt a little short of breath. She heard Tracy say to Diana, 'You're some talent, you know that? Ruthless, too.' She chuckled. Diana thanked her graciously, and when Aurelle looked again, she felt herself shrink, become smaller

beside Diana's success. She was doing something important, something more. More than Aurelle could ever do. Aurelle was selfish to have objected.

'What do *you* think of these?' Tracy called to Aurelle. Her face was impassive. She was a professional, serious. Intimidating. Aurelle knew nothing. What could she add? She was nothing.

'I like them,' Aurelle said quietly, shrugging.

'How do you feel about being the star of them?' Tracy probed.

'I'm not—' Aurelle stopped. She doubted everything. 'I don't know. Fine, I guess.' She cleared her throat as she saw Diana looking at her, waiting. 'I'm glad to be a part of them.'

Diana nodded. 'She represents a type. She is both iconic and symbolic.'

Aurelle wandered out of the room as they continued talking. She saw a plastic glass half-full of wine and she tipped it into her mouth, the sweet pleasure of it hitting her dry mouth like a splash of cool water. She felt eyes on her and turned to see Diana's professor, Grace, watching from the doorway. She wiped her mouth self-consciously, but Grace had already turned away, her small frame disappearing into another studio space.

'What will Marianne Taylor have to say about these?' she heard the woman ask Diana.

There was a pause. Then Diana said in a voice that was softer, searching: 'I guess... there was a time when that might have mattered to me. But now...' Aurelle heard her exhale a burst of breath. 'I don't care. She needs to make room.'

Later, when it was over, Diana wanted to have breakfast together. She was animated, excited, her face flush with opportunity. Aurelle noticed that she wore the borrowed lipstick regularly now, the red making her features more severe, striking. She touched her own mouth, and realized she'd forgotten to put on any makeup that morning.

Diana was eagerly eating, Aurelle pushing her food around her plate, smiling weakly at her friend.

'I can't believe how fast this is happening,' Diana was saying. 'I mean, Grace told me that she was going to make some calls, but' – she laughed – 'I mean, I didn't expect this.' She put a forkful in her mouth, her eyes bright. 'I think that this is the start of something.' She grasped Aurelle's

hand and held it tight. 'Finally!'

And in that touch, which felt like it was coming from across a great expanse, Aurelle clung to a hope that they could be what they were.

Things indeed began happening for Diana very quickly. Within a week, an art agent came to view all of her studies and paintings, and offered to represent her. Tracy booked her for a show at the gallery the following autumn. Diana refused to sell the paintings, which, many mused later, was very astute. She began working tirelessly on more, doing her written assignments for her degree quickly and with little commitment, but getting passing grades. The art students were now to begin work on an end of year show, and so her new pieces would be featured there. She was a curiosity to the other art students, whom she often found standing around her works-in-progress when she arrived at the studio. They would nod and make brief conversation with her, but never really engage.

She visited Grace in her studio. It was a small room that functioned as an office and work space. On the walls were photos and articles. A computer on a little desk, an easel in the corner displaying a small painting-in-progress of a bird. Grace perched on a stool and offered Diana a chair.

'Well,' she said. 'Quite a whirlwind for you, yes?'

Diana agreed. 'Yes, it's been overwhelming.'

'But not unwelcome.'

'No. No, not that.'

'And you plan on continuing with this theme? For your next body of work?'

'I do, yes.'

'Good.' Grace hopped off the stool gingerly and reached into a drawer for a key. 'I'd like to offer you your own space. It's off of the main studio and will allow you some privacy in which to work.' She handed the key to Diana. 'I typically invite a student into this space every few years. When I see potential. And I do in you, Diana. A willingness to sacrifice. A singular purpose.'

'Thank you,' Diana said, heat rising in her cheeks. She felt moved, almost tearful. She swallowed.

Grace walked past her and opened the door, signaling that the meeting was over. 'I'm keen to see where you take this work, Diana.'

Diana pocketed the key and thanked Grace again, her heart quickening as she sought out her new workspace. She opened its door, and entered. She looked around, thrilling at the prospect of making art there. And, under the watchful eyes of her peers, she closed herself off from the rest of the Den.

At parties, at raves, at Milk, which the girls continued to frequent, they lost their inhibitions, and Diana would sometimes be accosted by a drunk or high fellow student who wanted to talk to her, or worse, Aurelle, about the paintings. They would point at Aurelle, who'd be standing in a corner drinking or dancing with her eyes blissfully closed, and say, *Is that your next painting? Are you going to paint her doing that?* And Diana would smile blandly and say *maybe*. And she did. Aurelle with a huge dress hiked up, sitting on the toilet, head in hands; Aurelle wearing an oversized MT T-shirt and eating a fried egg while reading; Aurelle on a cloud, snorting cocaine, floating above a landscape burnt to the ground. 'I don't do it that much,' Aurelle said, when she saw the sketches for that one.

'It's not you; not really,' Diana waved her off.

Any gains Aurelle had made towards feeling separate, feeling like her own person, were lost. She stopped writing in her notebook, stopped her poetry, found her books couldn't hold her attention. She stopped returning Rachel's phone calls, too, making excuses not to see her. She was embarrassed that her friend had been with her that first night at the art opening and couldn't exorcise that mortification, reliving it every time they saw each other. Rachel was now the friend who asked if she was OK every time they met up, and Aurelle didn't want that. She wanted fun back, she wanted forgetting. She saw Rachel talking to Diana when they were out one night, and she turned her back, knowing it was about her, about the art.

Diana turned her head to blow smoke away from Rachel.

'Maybe you should paint someone else,' Rachel had shouted over the music, an edge in her voice.

Diana looked into the crowd and shook her head. 'They wouldn't be the same,' she said plainly. Other people only turned up in her paintings as background detail, as secondary characters. She looked down at Rachel, explaining, 'Anyway, this is a series. If I changed the person, it would disrupt things, and not in a good way.' She put her hand on Rachel's shoulder and said, 'Look, we like you, Rachel, really, we do, but me and

Aurette... it's just us. Hard for anyone else to understand.' She shrugged. 'Trust me: she knows that it has to be her.' And she left Rachel, moving gracefully through the crowd.

Aurette saw them speaking, watched Diana disappear. When Rachel looked over at her, eyebrows arched in concern, she turned her back, losing herself to music and dance, letting drugs fill her ears and mind like cotton candy, the best, pink, light fuzz.

The paintings were stunning: rich, lush, expertly done. 'They almost make you thirsty, they're so fresh,' Diana had heard another faculty member muse to Grace as she'd arrived at the Den one morning. A few people stood studying her work through the doorway of her new private space. Another professor nodded in agreement and said, 'And that girl. She's just perfect.'

She was. Diana's anger at Aurette for hiding Marianne's betrayal hadn't diminished, but the success of her work was more than making up for it. The Aurette in the paintings was paying penance, taking on the burden of real life. There was a passion in the rendering, and the passion was fury. A love that had congealed into hate, revenge, and seemed to glow with energy. Diana knew that Aurette was giving something of herself, and if she wasn't, Diana knew how to take it.

More than once Diana had reminded Aurette that it was important that she not kick up too much of a fuss about her role in the work. 'You need to see beyond this moment; you need to see the long-term impact.' Diana had said simply, nodding so that soon Aurette was, too. 'It's too late to change now; it can't be anyone else. You're the girl.'

Aurette was fading in the real world as she became lush and bright in the paintings. A trade. She was doing more drugs than ever: she started smoking weed from the moment she woke up (always late in the day), then moved on to coke and poppers, E and acid as the day turned into night, sometimes unable to go out to any of the parties on campus that she used to love. She was pale and thin. Her hair, usually long and lush, hung in dirty hunks. Her eyes sparkled when she was high, and she became animated and energetic, but it was a false, artificial brightness. Her books gathered dust on tables.

Marianne was calling with more frequency, her calls often going unanswered; Diana now also refused to speak to her. The weekend before,

the *Toronto Star* had published a story in the Arts section about Diana's paintings. 'Marianne Taylor's Legacy, Blood and Water on Canvas.' It displayed, in colour, the painting of Aurelle throwing up, and was a saucy article that gleefully attempted to poke a hole in the Taylor façade. *One could learn a lot from an art student of Rocky Barrens University, it appears. Diana Martin grew up next door to the Taylors, and now lives with the heiress to the dynasty in a cabin in the RBU woods. Life, it seems, is at her fingertips, or at least in the bedroom next door.* It went on, applauding the skill and craftsmanship of the work itself, noting: *Diana Martin paints like a veteran of the medium, not a nineteen-year-old girl, and we expect great things from her. Hopefully they will be equally juicy.* Marianne had phoned again, her measured voice calm as she left a message.

'I'll be visiting soon. I'm in LA right now, but, once I'm home, I can't wait to get up there to see you girls and find out what you're up to!' She laughed, but there was something sharp in her tone where there hadn't been before.

'Let her come,' Diana had said, mostly to herself, deleting the message. 'It's art. I don't expect her to understand. She makes shoes.' She said this so cruelly that Aurelle, who had been dozing on the couch, called out, 'What's your problem? I thought you loved her!'

Diana paused, then forced a laugh. 'I'm just joking. God, you are so serious all the time. I just don't have time for a visit right now.'

'Well,' Aurelle slumped down again. 'I think she might actually be visiting me, so I think we'll survive.'

DIANA AND GRACE HAD BEGUN spending time together outside of classes. For a drink; for a tea in one or the other's studio; sometimes they were seen walking around campus together. Other students in the Fine Arts program registered this immediately, their jealousy hanging like a funk in the Den. Anna, a printmaker, stirred up gossip in the studios, starting conversations with other students at the cleanup sinks or on the deck outside the building: *I'm sorry, but I just think it's gross the way she kisses up to Grace.* And other students would, for their own reasons – jockeying for their own position at the Den, attempting to appeal to Anna, to fit in – contribute to the chatter. Of all those who whispered that it was unseemly, that it was unfair or unprofessional of Grace, there was not one who wouldn't have gladly joined her in her studio for a drink, given the chance. Looks were exchanged when Diana arrived at the Den and went either to her own or Grace's closed space.

Grace maintained an air of distance and indifference during classes, often ignoring Diana altogether as she moved around the room speaking with students about their assignments. Later, she might appear while Diana was working in her studio and inquire as to the progress of the work, offering a cup of something.

Grace moved through RBU comfortably. She was a well-respected professor who was notoriously difficult to impress, and, like Diana, was unbothered by gossip; in fact, she secretly seemed to thrive on it. She lived on campus in a small cabin, alone, but attended many student events throughout the year, even those outside her own program. She was known for pushing back on the administration when the students' best interests were at risk, but also for dispensing blunt assessment of students' work when she felt it was needed. She was secretive, private and had no qualms with stating her opinion or risking her popularity. She was not friends with the students in general. She had taken an interest in Diana's progress and career, but not out of kindness. It was always about the work. Her attention was not, Diana knew, because she liked Diana personally, but rather because the work showed promise and potential. Diana had felt the chill of Grace's bored dismissal earlier in the year and knew that her professor's

companionship was born of curiosity, and that it could disappear at any time.

It was early morning, and Grace had asked Diana if she'd like to join her for a walk as they had both been at the Den since the early hours of dawn. They moved quietly through the campus paths, listening to the sounds of the natural world: the hooting of an owl going home to roost, the snapping of twigs beneath their feet. The lake was quiet for the most part, although Diana noticed that the rowing team had beaten them there and were already across the lake, crews slicing through the water in uncharacteristic silence. She and Grace settled on a large rock. Grace unscrewed her thermos and doled out coffee for both of them. It was hot and bitter, and the taste of it hit the back corners of Diana's mouth pleasantly.

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. I like my coffee scaldingly hot. A painful awakening.' Grace pulled her small frame into a cross-legged position. 'So, you've made quite a name for yourself of late, haven't you?'

'I suppose.'

'People are talking, as you know, about whether it is "fair" of you to paint your subject in the way that you are.'

Diana looked across the lake at the rowers, the sun beginning to brighten the water as it rose over the trees. 'Yes.'

Grace took a drink. 'It's nonsense. The subject is not a person, even if it began that way. What people get in a knot about is the commentary. And commentary should be interesting. In your case, I believe it is. Wealth, privilege, youth, addiction. There are many topics there. At any rate, the conversation has turned, as it often does, to you, the artist.' She licked her lips. 'Fame. Fame for you. Fame for RBU.'

Diana looked at Grace's small, open face, and nodded almost imperceptibly.

'The growing interest in you is just another aspect of the work. It moves the work into the realm of performance. Brings it off the canvas and extends it. You're the art now as well.'

'People say I should stop painting Aurelle.' She thought of Marianne. Of her impending visit.

'Right. Aurelle. I'd forgotten her name. Well,' Grace shrugged. 'That is for you to decide. I wonder, of course, what would become of your work,

where you would take it if you did, indeed, stop that series now...’

Diana imagined trying something else. ‘I don’t feel like I’ve exhausted the series; I want to see where I can take this.’

‘Yes, I quite agree. The stage has been set. It’d be a shame to call the curtain so soon.’ Grace paused. ‘Of course, I suppose friendship is important. One cannot have everything.’ She leaned her head back then, took a deep breath through her nose and closed her eyes as she exhaled. ‘I love mornings here, don’t you?’

Later that day, Aurelle stopped by the Den. She nodded shyly at a few familiar faces who stared as she made her way through the studios to Diana’s room. She knocked on the door, but there was no answer.

‘I think she left to get a bite to eat,’ a voice said. Aurelle turned to see Noah, drying his hands at the sink.

‘Oh. OK.’ Aurelle ran a hand through her hair and swallowed. ‘Um. Can you tell her I came by?’

‘Sure,’ said Noah. ‘But –’ he reached out a hand in her direction. ‘Do you want to, I dunno, grab a coffee? Maybe she’ll be back after. I need a break anyhow.’

Aurelle agreed, her mind dull, not noticing how Noah had brightened as they left the Den together.

‘So you have three brothers? Wow,’ Noah said, lifting his coffee to his lips, his eyes on Aurelle. ‘What’s it like being the only girl?’ He was so oblivious to the fact that she didn’t have a normal life like other kids; it was almost refreshing that he just wanted to make small talk about their siblings.

Aurelle shifted in her seat, looking around the café to see if Diana might be there. ‘It’s fine,’ she shrugged. ‘People compare me to my mom a lot, in a way they don’t with my brothers.’ She looked out the window and thought of her mom. ‘I miss her a lot, actually.’

Noah rattled on happily about his family and Aurelle let her mind drift. Maybe it would be nice to go home and see her family, or if her mother came here.

‘I saw you at the *Badlands* reading,’ Noah said, and Aurelle started, surprised. That seemed so long ago. ‘So you’re a poet, I guess?’

She waved a hand. ‘No, no. That was... just, like an experiment.’

Noah lifted a shoulder and smiled kindly. ‘I thought you were really good.’

I have a copy at home and I've read your poem a few times. It's solid, seriously.' He sat up straighter. 'Look, I know everyone always talks about Diana, or your mom, or whatever, but you should let them know the real you. You've got something!'

Aurette looked outside at the trees, their branches starting to bud. 'I don't think so. I don't want it badly enough.'

Noah sighed and laughed. 'I hear you on that front. Sometimes I feel like throwing in the towel, too.'

They talked about ambition and trying to figure out who you are, and Aurette was grateful to Noah. He was honest and uncomplicated. Eventually they finished up their coffees, and returned together to the Den, walking slowly and enjoying each other's company. Diana was still not there, or at least wasn't answering the knocking at her studio door, and Aurette was tired of trying to see her, unsure of what she'd say anyhow.

She said goodbye to Noah, who was setting up his own easel, and left alone, her feet carrying her heavily down the steps and into the woods.

AURELLE DIDN'T WANT HER MOM coming to the cottage. She was anxious about her seeing Diana, and wanted to avoid any kind of confrontation, let alone draw more attention to all of them. She knew Marianne was furious about the paintings and her worst fear was that the two of them would fight. She had visions of Diana storming out, leaving her to waste away alone or wander aimlessly and without any purpose. She didn't know who she was anymore, not really. She couldn't make sense of her feelings. But Diana needed her, at least as a muse, and that made her feel like she was on firmer ground. She didn't tell Diana her mom was coming, something she couldn't have imagined hiding a few short months ago.

She did a line of coke the morning of the visit, and took a pill from one of the many bottles in the bathroom drawer that Diana had been accumulating all year from some guy in residence. Kyle, or something. She looked in the mirror and spent a few minutes brushing her hair and trying to make herself look presentable, something she hadn't done in some time. Her eyes, she knew, were redder than they ought to be. She smiled at her reflection, trying to appear like a normal, happy daughter, but it looked like a grotesque grimace. Her heart was beating fast. She pulled more faces, making herself uglier and uglier, contorting her mouth, teeth over lips, eyes bulging. She imagined Diana painting her like this, preserving her every strange and private moment. Nothing was safe, everything was beautiful and terrible. Aurelle didn't know if she needed Diana to stop or keep going. She didn't know if it mattered anymore what she wanted. Sometimes, she lay in bed and wondered and worried. *If I fall asleep like this will she draw me? Does that make me happy or sad? Does that make me feel safe or unsafe? If she paints me, I am still here.* Her mind was muddled and she wasn't good at making decisions. She was afraid of saying things she might regret later and so said nothing at all. *What if this choice ruins everything? Or this one? Don't make any choices. Just keep being moved along. Don't resist.* Since the art show, they hadn't slept in each other's rooms together, returning, with some unspoken agreement, to their own rooms alone at night. Aurelle left her door open, hoping Diana might return, that she might perhaps come

while Aurelle was sleeping. Or that a part of herself, of her sleeping mind, might flit out in the night. Diana, for her part, kept her bedroom door closed. Even in her most stoned, fever-dream highs, Aurelle knew what a closed door meant.

Aurelle combed her hair and stared at it, at herself. What would happen, she wondered, if she changed? If she made a choice to change how she looked? She pulled open a drawer and rooted around among the pills and makeup and hair ties. She withdrew a pair of scissors. They were long and silver and glinted in the vanity lights. She opened them and ran her finger over the blade, her mind firing on the pill and cocaine, brightening, awakening at the thrill of a road taken.

Diana was working in her new, generously windowed private studio. She knew that her procurement of such a space had caused bitterness and resentment among her peers. She ignored nagging doubts about her solitary life; she was very good at compartmentalizing. It made her appear cold or detached. The truth was the opposite. She had a deep well of love, but it was not accessible to just anyone.

She focused on painting Aurelle's hair, working carefully to show the strands when the light was hitting them, pieces part of a whole. She managed, in her dedication to getting it exactly right, to recreate hair that was due for a wash, needed tending, that almost had a smell to it. The girl who started it all, the girl who now evoked pity, judgement, resentment. This painting would be part of the RBU end of year show, but also Diana's debut at a city gallery. She was building a body of work large enough for a show, but really intended for more than one. She'd found her style, her voice, her themes – all on the back of the girl, the family, the life she'd thought she wanted. While the rest of her class was still trying to master still-life assignments, Diana had cracked through. *Girl*, she called them, each with a date. *Girl, May 16; Girl, December 3.*

The dates were sometimes from when she'd had the idea, made the sketch; other times, she just made them up. People would guess whether the dates were significant or not, analyze where the moments in the paintings took place. A party, a house, a dock. Aurelle's bedroom at home, where she'd spent lonely hours and, later, kindred ones with Diana. The Taylor family pool, the kitchen where everyone gathered – so many places Aurelle had

been glad to escape, made permanent again. More: all the places she'd come to love with Diana at RBU, now rendered in oils, exposed, laughably available for all.

Everyone knew who the girl was, that she was Aurelle Taylor – *yes, that Taylor girl*. Famous again. To them, she was someone else; to Diana, she would always be someone used as collateral, bartered in exchange for the life Diana now knew she was destined for. *Her dear heart. Her best friend*. Aurelle had offered Diana friendship and family when she'd thought she needed both, not knowing that the fantasy would one day become a currency.

Aurelle arrived at the restaurant late, her face flushed, her fingers going up to her hair, feeling its new length, cropped short around her ears. It had been hard to do, the back especially, but once she'd started she couldn't very well stop, and she told herself it was fresh and punk, and she finally felt like she could be someone else. She looked across the floor towards the window seat and saw her mother, who immediately stood up. Aurelle swallowed and smiled, crossing the floor. Marianne had already ordered, and Aurelle blanched at the rich course of steak frites that had been brought on steaming plates.

'Your hair...' Marianne stammered, reaching for her daughter and wrapping her in a warm embrace. 'What... Honey, what happened?'

'I cut it,' Aurelle said, simply, a smile frozen on her face. She fought to keep it there. She let her mom's fingers touch the back, feel the messy, choppy pixie cut she'd done. Because she'd wanted to. Hadn't she? She pushed Marianne's hand away and sat down across from her. She looked for a server. 'I'm dying of thirst,' she said, avoiding her mother's gaze.

'Why did you do that, Aurelle?' Marianne asked, cutting into her steak and chewing carefully. 'What's going on?'

'Nothing! I just wanted a change.' She nodded and grinned at a passing server.

'Is this because of Diana?'

'No!' Aurelle heard herself shouting, and a few heads turned. She reddened, lowering her voice. 'Not everything is about her, Mom.'

'I don't think it is,' Marianne said. 'Or at least, it shouldn't be. But there is quite a lot of excitement around you two lately. The media, photographers –'

they're at the house all the time.'

'What's unusual about that?'

Marianne rolled her eyes and adjusted the napkin on her lap. 'They're not there for me, darling.'

Aurette looked at her, surprised. 'I didn't know that.'

'Well,' Marianne returned her gaze to her daughter. 'It's true. They *all* want to know about Diana. They've tried pestering the Martins also, but, from what I can tell, no one is answering that door.' She paused. 'I'm just worried about you, honey.'

'Mom, I'm fine.' Aurette looked out the window, but it was dark now, and all she saw was her reflection. She was startled by it. She brought a hand to her hair, moving pieces of it around.

'I don't think you are,' her mom said quietly. 'Why don't you come home for a bit?'

Aurette felt tears filling her eyes. 'I don't need to do that,' she answered. 'I'm fine. I want to stay here.' She imagined sitting in her room at home, or at the kitchen table, her brothers staring at her, or worse, ignoring her. More press. More photographers. Her mother perhaps using her as another opportunity to promote her own brand. She wouldn't feel at home there. Not without Diana. Maybe she could see if they could both go home. She took a bite and her food tasted like nothing.

'Your nose is bleeding, Aurette,' her mom said, handing her a napkin. Aurette held it to her face and looked at her mother. 'Whatever you decide, you need to start taking better care of yourself. This,' she waved a hand in Aurette's direction. 'This is *not* fine. It doesn't look good, honey. Not on either of us.' She sighed. 'I can't make you do anything, but I want you to promise you'll at least get some sleep.'

'OK,' Aurette nodded, relieved. 'I will.'

'And see a hairdresser. I think I know of one up here. I'll find the number.'

By the time they went outside, Marianne's warm arm around her daughter's shoulders, there was a crowd in the parking lot. A cheer went up in the air like a shot when they were seen, and Marianne tightened her hold on Aurette, startled. She was not unused to fans, especially lately, but she wasn't prepared for this, here. Kids were jumping, calling out. Someone was playing music somehow. And were they on the roof of her car?

‘Shit, is that Aurelle?’ Aurelle turned to see Anna, a girl from Diana’s studio class, pointing. Then, in a lower voice, ‘What the fuck is with her hair?’

‘MT!’ A boy called from the other side, rushing forward. He was wearing an oversized MT shirt, sneakers, large jeans, a fun fur vest and enormous sunglasses. ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe it’s you! It’s fucking *you*! I love you! Do you want a Twizzler?’ He shoved a bag at them, and Aurelle winced. He turned to Aurelle as though he knew her. ‘Oh my God, I love it!’ He shouted, reaching out to touch her hair. Marianne shoved him, hard, and he fell.

‘Don’t touch her,’ she snapped. The roiling crowd seemed to stand still. The boy got up, his mouth quivering. ‘You can’t just *touch* her!’ Marianne shouted.

‘OK,’ he said, his voice quiet. The Twizzlers had scattered all over the ground like bloody rivulets. No one said anything. Marianne ushered Aurelle to the car, and the crowd parted, music still playing from somewhere. Aurelle felt hot tears coming down her cheeks as she got into the car, the door closing with a *thump*. Marianne got in on her side, started the car, and the still-fascinated figures moved out of their way.

‘It’s OK, Aurelle,’ she said, maneuvering the car out of the lot and onto the gravel road, acting as though nothing had happened. ‘It’s going to be fine. We’re Taylors.’ She gave Aurelle a small smile. Aurelle tried her best to return it.

Aurelle said goodbye to her mother, telling her she just wanted to go to bed. Marianne kissed her hard on the cheek, reminding her over and over how much she loved her, that she was a phone call away. Aurelle was tired. That was true. She stood watching as the car pulled away, the gravel making a popping sound. She turned to look through the forest of trees towards the dark water. She opened the front door to the warm light inside, and shut it quietly behind her. She took a deep breath, putting a small smile on her face.

Diana was at the kitchen island, jotting notes on a piece of paper. When she looked up, she froze, staring at Aurelle, at her shorn hair. She took a sip of red wine. Her lips turned upward as she swallowed.

‘I’m glad you did that,’ she said, and Aurelle felt a small relief. The knot

in her heart loosened slightly. 'Come on,' Diana gestured at a box of pizza. 'There's lots left.'

And Aurelle was brought into the fold of her home, where she knew if she could just play along, not be difficult, not object, all would be fine: she would be cocooned in love. She fell asleep curled on the couch by the fire an hour later, the light sensation of being watched, watched over, washing over her.

IN THE END, IT WASN'T a long time. Between the winter and the thawing spring; the finality of their time together at the cottage. It didn't feel fast, of course. Each day felt sluggish, stretched out, some seeming to have no significance at all. But when memories slip like demons to the front of the mind, it looks to be such a tiny slice of time. It looks like what happened did so quickly. Two seasons. Would a winter and a spring ever mean so much again? Each of those days played their role. If they could go back, would they know which one to change? What to do differently? The days that felt like nothing might well have been turning points. What if they hadn't left the cottage this or that day? What if they'd stayed in, or gone out? What if they'd skipped classes? What if they hadn't? What hour? What minute? The burden of all the insignificant choices could become such a curse; doing nothing, lest they reawaken the fates.

But for now, it was spring. Classes were almost over. Aurelle had scraped by in most of them, handing in papers that she hardly read beforehand and would never look at again. They would be returned to her with circles around hastily crafted sentences. *Is this your thesis statement? It should appear earlier. Expand here.* But, by then, she would care even less.

She ran into Rachel one day on the way through the campus woods.

'Hey!' Rachel smiled, and Aurelle tried to do the same. 'Hey,' Rachel said again, gently touching Aurelle's arm. 'You OK?' The morning was crisp but there was warmth behind it, the crocuses peeping up behind rocks. Aurelle's face was pale and her pupils very large.

Aurelle nodded. The past few weeks had been a confusing blur of gossip and getting high and trying to surrender herself to what Diana could make sense of, even if she, Aurelle, couldn't. There was a lot of talk about Marianne's visit, and rumours continued to swirl around Aurelle and Diana – that they were bitches, that they were drug addicts, that they were sluts, that Diana's art was all hype, that she had no talent, that Marianne had attacked a student, on and on.

Rachel knew this, was surprised at how many people were determined to hate them, shocked at the vitriol directed to two girls that no one really knew. More: people claimed to have lived near them in Toronto, to have

been in classes with them, to have seen them at this or that party, making out with this or that person. There was a desperate need for proximity to the girls' glamour, even while they tried to reject it: hope that some of the sparkle would land in their gaping mouths just so they could spit it out. The Aurelle who had thrilled at the rush of making new friends or talking to strangers had almost entirely disappeared. She had a glazed, quiet way about her. She was a wisp, a ghost. Now, she was so high that it shocked and concerned Rachel, who walked with her further than she needed to, frightened by her friend's state.

Aurelle's mind wandered over the last week. She had gotten her hair properly cut by the hairdresser Marianne had recommended, and the short hair suited her delicate face. She had also gone to see Diana at her studio one afternoon recently. Diana had completed a large work called *Girl, February 26*. It depicted Aurelle cutting her own hair in the bathroom, half of her long hair gone, laying in clumps on the counter, her face a mask of concentration, lips chapped, a small spray of acne on her forehead. The bathroom lighting gave her a pale, yellowish hue, and the scissors flashed. Aurelle had gasped involuntarily at the painting: at its painful truthfulness, at the realistic representation, at the unabashed approach to the subject, which was what Aurelle had become. The Subject. *Girl*.

Aurelle stumbled on a rock and Rachel caught her arm.

'I'm worried about you, Aurelle,' she said.

'I'm fine.' Aurelle's voice was thick. She felt like that was all she said nowadays. She forced a laugh. 'We don't need to worry, Diana knows what she's doing.'

'Diana?' Rachel paused.

Aurelle waved her off, her voice light. 'I'm totally fine.' She laughed strangely. 'It's hard to explain,' she said. 'You couldn't understand. It's art that's real. None of this matters.' She leaned over and kissed Rachel's cheek in a moment of lucidity. 'Seriously, Rachel, I'm fine. I'll call you later, OK?' And she floated away, towards a thick pocket of trees.

Rachel watched her: her friend, the burgeoning poet, the daughter of celebrity, her friend who was disappearing. A nearby chickadee made a mournful call that precipitated the one it is better known for. *High low. High low. Chickadee dee dee.*

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, Aurelle found herself heading towards the Art Den, knowing she could find Diana there. She was aware, as always, of eyes on her as she took the wooden steps up the porch of the building that had become so familiar to her. Students were hanging around on the steps, on the porch, smoking and laughing easily. Aurelle ducked her head, touching her short hair, feeling every movement like it was a declaration. She lifted her eyes and saw Noah, who smiled, and she felt a wave of gratitude. She knew he had a crush on her, and though she didn't feel the same about him, the kindness of his face was like a soothing balm.

'Hey, Aurelle!' he called, breaking off from the others. They watched him approach her.

'Hi,' she said, quietly.

'How are you doing?' He gestured at her hair. 'I like it. Very Winona Ryder. But, you know, blonde.'

Aurelle returned a weak smile. 'Thanks. Um, you're working here today? I mean. Obviously.'

'Yeah, just catching up on an assignment. Not that it really matters what the rest of us do, right? Not with your paintings around! You're a star.' He nudged her playfully. 'But seriously. They're really cool.'

'Oh, well I have nothing to do with them. They're not *my* paintings,' she said, her face reddening.

'Well, hey, you're the muse, though, right? That's pretty generous of you.' Aurelle looked into his eyes, saying nothing. 'Unless... you don't want to be...?' Noah ran his hand through his hair. 'Shit. Did I step into something by saying that?'

The large wooden door opened and Diana was there.

'Oh. Hi.' She looked at them both and cocked her head in question.

'Hey,' Aurelle said, and she took the steps up to the door. 'We were just – K, bye, Noah.' She touched her hair again and, without another word, went inside. Noah rubbed his chin and looked at Diana, who hadn't moved.

'Her work is never done, I guess,' Noah said, shrugging and turning his back on Diana, walking back to the small group of students smoking nearby. Diana watched him go, returned the stares of her peers with a hard

look, and turned, walking into the studio.

Aurette was there waiting, the drugs softening the edges, giving her a relaxed feeling like, she thought, a pinkish milk – a soft, thick warmth. She smiled, thinking herself silly. She looked around the room at the paintings in progress, her face on all of them, like a hall of mirrors.

Diana closed the door and she turned, surprised.

‘Hi,’ Aurette said.

‘What’s up?’ Diana asked, her voice cool and clipped.

Aurette shrugged. ‘You haven’t been home in a while.’

‘Sorry, but I need to get these done.’ Aurette glanced at the paintings again shyly. In one, she sat cross-legged, her sweatshirt cuffs over her hands, her eyes almost shut; she was smiling dumbly, looking like every stoned teenager since the dawn of weed. In another, she lay on her back on the dock by the lake, holding a book up in front of her, wearing jogging pants and a coat but no shoes, her legs sprawled open, her bare feet dirty. Another showed her making out with a dark-haired guy whose face was obscured by her hands, his own hands down the back of her pants. She felt her breath quickening. She looked at the fourth painting, her in the shower, pulling the curtain around her face, her mouth open in complaint, mascara down her face.

‘Diana, I–’ What, she wondered. *Need you to stop?* She opened her mouth, closed it again. ‘Let’s go home,’ she heard herself say.

‘Soon,’ Diana said, back to working on her current canvas: a plan, an underpainting of her next piece. ‘I’m almost done for the day.’

‘No. *Home*, home. Back to the city.’ She thought of the house, of her family, and suddenly felt just as trapped at the thought of returning. ‘Or... somewhere else? Why don’t we go camping? Let’s just get away from it all for a while!’ Her voice was high, frantic. The pleasure of the downer she took was turning in on itself and she felt panicked.

Diana looked at her. ‘Why? Why would we leave?’

‘It’ll be like before,’ Aurette said. ‘We can be together, just us, away from all of this.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Diana said, returning to the canvas. ‘I have too much to do here, Aurette. I’m sorry. I just can’t.’ She looked at her friend and sighed. ‘Look. I know things aren’t the same as they used to be in some ways, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Things are going great,

actually.’ *For me* is what Aurelle heard. *Things are going great for me.*

Aurelle nodded miserably, unsure why everything had changed, or what she could do. She stayed for a few more quiet minutes, then left the studio. Diana waved a hand distractedly, so immersed in her work.

She wandered through the trees and back down to the lake. The rowing club had started their early training in the cold, thawed lake. She watched them laughing and calling out to one another in that untroubled, confident way that athletes have, their voices echoing across the water. She had class in an hour: Children’s Lit. She withdrew *Anne of Green Gables* from her bag and sat on a cold rock to read. She cast her mind back to when Diana read this to her in their first summer as friends. That is when Aurelle had said, shyly, for the first time, ‘You’re *my* Diana.’ And now, reading about Anne and Diana, those bosom friends, it was bittersweet. *Kindred spirits are not so scarce as I used to think*, Aurelle read, and she wondered if this was true. She had always thought that she and Diana were so unique, so special. Maybe it wasn’t a good thing, she realized now. Maybe it was unhealthy. She tasted that word on her mind, *unhealthy* – her mother had said that. She felt guilty for considering it. She pushed it from her mind. A bird twittered nearby and she took a deep breath of fresh air. She got up and walked towards the cluster of residence buildings, figuring she’d know what to do when she got there.

Aurelle didn’t often go to Segwun – certainly not during the day. Whenever she’d been, there’d been a party raging and students in all states on all floors of the building. Things were more civilized just now: students lounging in the common room in their PJs; music playing lightly from rooms with their doors slightly open; girls and guys walking together and alone to and from classes, knapsacks on their backs, books in arms. She imagined what her life might have been like had she opted for residence, rather than to live with Diana in virtual seclusion, at the mansion on the lake. Maybe she would have felt surer of herself in the end, participated in student politics, had a group of friends. It was hard to imagine early in the fall that she would ever feel as she did now: so untethered and unmoored, like she might drift out to the middle of the lake and up into the stars. She wandered down the hall of each of the floors, unsure what she was looking for, but certain she’d know it when she got there. Sure enough, after a few minutes she saw a partly open door, music playing from within, a

continuous fog of smoke wafting from inside. What was once surely a cheerful, red construction paper cutout of the name *Kyle* hung limply over the room number. She pushed the door open.

Kyle was sitting on a chair with a guitar on his lap, a joint resting in between his fingers. He looked up, sleepy-eyed and smiling crookedly.

‘Hey,’ he said, sitting straighter, taking a drag to mask his mild surprise.

She gave him a small wave. ‘Hi... it’s Kyle, right?’ Diana normally did all of the drug procurement in their relationship, but she knew who Kyle was. Everyone did. He laughed, nodding, and waved her in. She felt a thrill at being somewhere without Diana knowing.

‘What’s up?’ he asked, and offered her the joint. She thanked him, taking a long haul, eyes closed. He chuckled, watching her. She sat on his bed, feeling the flannel sheets between her fingers.

‘I dunno,’ she said, looking around his room. ‘I guess I just wanted to come by myself for once. Diana usually,’ she looked at him and waved her fingers airily. ‘You know.’

‘Yeah, that Diana...’ he smirked. ‘She knows what she wants, man.’

‘Yeah...’ Aurelle replied. She vaguely remembered she was supposed to be in class, and thought of how there were so many versions of where she could be, who she could be. The Aurelle in class. The Aurelle here. The Aurelle in the *Girl* paintings. Where else?

She bought a large assortment from Kyle. He took the cash she gave him with little reaction, even though she knew it was a large sum.

‘Thanks,’ she said, leaving the room.

‘You, girl, can come to my room anytime,’ she heard Kyle say as she closed the door behind her.

POPPERS. A FLEETING, MOMENTARY ESCAPE from everything, everyone nearby. A thought explosion. Aurelle loved doing them even though the headaches they left her with were almost unbearable. A cloth over a tiny bottle to dampen it, then a deep breath into the cloth. Close her eyes and inhale, her mind immediately sent upwards, away from her like a balloon. Disappear. Expand. Shatter. Gone. It didn't last long, and the pain in her head afterwards tempted her to stop but she wanted it, that escape, again and again. She used to do poppers at the Milk raves, but no longer felt comfortable going to those since her mom had pissed off the raver kids. It hadn't stopped them from wearing all of her designs, she'd noticed, guessing they'd found a way to still love Marianne, but even now, after the initial backlash, they wouldn't accept Aurelle. Another thing that she'd lost. It was all so hard, so complicated. She'd just wanted a normal life, a life like she imagined Rachel's to be, or any other kid who went there, but she'd never have it. And for wanting it, she was spoiled, ungrateful. A privileged, rich bitch. A type. Forgetting, disappearing, that was easiest.

She'd wander the woods listening for action, spurred by the beer from this keg or that joint, and eventually she'd start to fade away into pleasure. She could forget that she hated what Diana was doing, that she was wishing, more and more, for a means to stop her, to stop the pain. She didn't know if it was *Girl* or herself she wanted to disappear. Something had to give.

It was the beginning of April. Classes were over and it was the week before exams, and people were letting their hair down after a long winter. There was an almost tangible release all over campus. The weather had finally begun to ease up on them. A warm spring had thawed the lake early, and streams and creeks rushed, flowers sprouted and the trees were becoming greener each day.

Diana was working at the studio in the early morning. She had few friends there: most of the students kept their distance and she preferred to work when the Den was empty, even though her own studio had a door that she could close. Even Aurelle was friendlier with some of the art students than Diana, just from months of visiting her there, and from the parties and

events. Diana knew she liked Noah, who was pleasant, but by no means a great talent. His interest in Aurelle had always irked her.

‘Hey,’ he called to her now, through the open door of her studio. She hadn’t heard him arrive, and poked her head out to see him setting up, his coffee on a windowsill. He picked up his mug and headed to her studio door. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Fine,’ Diana said, opening the door for him to come in. She was nothing if not cordial. ‘You’re here early.’ He had never been in her studio before.

‘Yeah, I had a shit sleep, so I just figured I’d try to be productive. Whoa...’ he murmured, looking around Diana’s space. ‘You, uh... OK. These are *bold*.’

Diana followed his gaze at her current work: Aurelle shone out at them, her face in different sizes, angles, expressions, lit by morning light. She nodded. ‘Yes, I hope so.’

Noah took a sip from his mug. ‘Yeah, I heard you were working on more. Aurelle told me.’ He hesitated, watching Diana for a reaction to this news. ‘I don’t know that she loves them, you know.’

‘Oh?’ Diana asked, ready for him to leave already.

‘Well. I mean, it’s no secret. She seems depressed. I don’t know her that well, but, like, she’s stoned, like, all the time. It’s not healthy.’

‘You’re right that you don’t know her. I do, however,’ Diana said, irritated that he’d baited her.

‘Sure, yeah, looks like,’ he mused, not as kind as before, gesturing at the paintings. ‘Her breakdown is like an idea factory for you.’

Diana laughed hollowly, turning with her brush to dab at a baking tin she was using as a palette.

‘She said her mom is pissed,’ Noah said lightly, walking to stand opposite a painting that showed Aurelle’s face tipped back in laughter, a filling in one of her molars darkening her white teeth. ‘I talked to her the other night at a party. She was pretty fucked up.’ He moved, mug in hand, to study a scene of Aurelle at the *Badlands* poetry reading, her eyes down, standing nervously in front of a microphone. ‘That was a good night,’ he said pointing at it. ‘It was her night...’ he let the statement hang. ‘Anyway. Just sayin’. I wouldn’t want Marianne Taylor coming after me.’

‘I’m not too worried about the Taylors, to be honest. But,’ she raised her eyebrows expectantly, taking a breath. ‘Perhaps you could keep your nose

out of our business in future.'

Noah looked startled. 'Your business? You're making this poor girl everyone's business.' He walked out, shaking his head. Diana waited until he was across the Den at his own easel before shutting the door of her studio, her sanctuary, and only then did she throw the tin palette into the corner, where it hit the wall and fell into the garbage below.

Some time ago, Diana had cut off Marianne, sliced her former idol out of her heart with very little trouble at all. She ignored any feelings of grief, focusing on her ambition, dulling everything else through drugs and work. *Onward*. Grace had eclipsed Marianne in a way, though Diana knew she was ultimately alone. But she had been alone before. She never answered the phone, and if she heard that Marianne was visiting, she spent the day in the studio with the door shut, listening to Slowdive, refusing to answer if anyone knocked. She knew that Marianne was disturbed by the attention her paintings had received, hated the subject matter, but in her heart she felt that this was because Marianne couldn't separate herself from them, couldn't appreciate the art – its importance, or who the girl in the paintings represented – and was jealous of Diana's rising fame.

For Diana, *Girl* had replaced Aurelle. She felt a thrill when painting her into reality, creating her circumstances which, yes, most often had come from Aurelle's life, but lately had emerged out of Diana's imagination. *Girl* was everything: tired, bratty, drunk, lost, found, sleepy, excited, depressed. She was a slice of one or many lives. The life that Diana had watched so carefully, that she had seen in Aurelle, her arms around her, Aurelle's soft skin warm under her touch. She had loved Aurelle. Aurelle had given her a ticket to the life she'd always wanted because she herself had pockets full of tickets; she didn't even realise how easy it was for her. It had all been a lie. Marianne had never loved Diana like a daughter. Diana had never been one of them. Wasn't a Taylor girl and never would be. Her own parents had ignored her when Keith was alive, and forgotten her when he died. She was no one's daughter. She was no one's girl. She needed to make her own life and leave all that behind. She didn't need Aurelle anymore; she had *Girl*. And there would be no 'stopping' her. The Taylors had no more power over her. And if Aurelle was dissolving, that was on her, not Diana.

So long as Aurelle was faithful to their life together – to Diana and Rocky Barrens – she would be no trouble at all.

The next evening, Diana suggested that she and Aurelle go out to Rocky Barrens to go stargazing. She imagined Aurelle in that place, under the majesty of the stars, and thought of a new piece, a new painting. It would be nice to have a visual to work with, she thought, and Aurelle needed a reminder of why she loved this place and their life.

‘Sure!’ Aurelle said, her eyes glassy but happy. And she put on her oversized RBU sweatshirt and hurried outside, waiting for Diana.

Unless they lived up north all year round, most people didn’t return to their cottages until May Two-Four weekend. The areas surrounding the campus were quiet without the influx of hikers, campers and cars laden with kayaks and canoes that would arrive in a few weeks.

They made their way across the empty dirt road towards the Barrens, a night-time spring breeze blowing Diana’s hair about maniacally. Aurelle closed her eyes against it, leaning her head back, her arms wrapped around herself. Diana glanced over at her and made a note to remember this. She smiled at the warm glow in her chest; it reminded her of the way things were.

‘Diana,’ Aurelle said, opening her eyes. ‘Do you ever think about fate?’

‘Sure, maybe sometimes.’

‘Like, maybe we are just meant to do what we’re doing.’

Branches and gravel under their feet, trees giving way to a scaggier landscape as they neared the Barrens.

Diana chuckled. ‘You can be anything you want to be if you put your mind to it. Master of your own fate.’

Aurelle looked sharply at her, her eyes bloodshot and alert, ‘That’s not what I mean, though. What if we have no control over that? Like, what if no matter what, certain things are going to happen? What if we were always going to be here right now?’

Diana was silent for a moment. ‘I dunno,’ she studied her friend. ‘I would hate to give credit to the universe for anything I do.’

‘It might make things easier,’ Aurelle murmured. ‘If you can blame fate for your bad choices, or the bad things people do to you.’

Diana was silent as they climbed over large rocks onto the Dark Sky Reserve area of Rocky Barrens. It was fully dark now, and, although it was a clear night, perfect for stargazing, there were few people there so they had their pick of a place to settle in. Aurelle chose a large, flat rock and, taking

Diana's hand, pulled her towards it. At her touch, Diana remembered the safe and easy way of their friendship – how at one time, nothing had seemed complicated or difficult – and she felt a pang of longing so sharp that it almost made her gasp.

They spread out the blanket they'd brought, Aurelle carefully pulling it straight, and lay down side by side, Diana's long legs lengthening out past the edges of the blanket, Aurelle's arms stretching up and over her head like a sleeping child. She sighed happily and they lay there together comfortably, taking in the majesty of the sky above them.

And for all they had been handed in their lives, all they had taken for granted, these two girls could still be surprised by natural beauty. Neither had ever seen such an abundance of stars at home in the city. Here, it seemed that the sky was made up of stars, that they were fighting for space in the blackness. It was completely quiet save for the occasional murmuring from the few other people in the reserve. Diana reached out for Aurelle's hand, and they lay together once again: in friendship, in sisterhood. The girls became lost in their own thoughts: one, with a surge in her chest, felt a yearning for glory, for real significance; the other disappeared into the vast sky, just another star that had burnt out before anyone noticed, lost in the many, unremarkable on her own.

They were quiet on the way home, struck dumb by the magnitude of the sky, by their own reflections. Diana felt inspired by the experience, as she was by so many things, and couldn't wait to get back to the Den. After a while, Aurelle took Diana's hand once more and, lifting her friend's knuckles to her mouth to kiss them faintly, said quietly, 'I – I think I need you to stop painting me.' Her friend, who had loved her, who still did, would do what she asked – of this she was certain.

But Diana looked at her, and pulled her hand away. Aurelle swallowed hard, hurt.

'No,' Diana said. 'I won't, Aurelle.'

'You could at least hear me out.'

'It won't make a difference.' Diana's long legs took her at a brisk pace through the forest, and Aurelle sped up beside her.

'You always said you would—'

'No, Aurelle,' Diana stopped, turning slowly. 'No, I didn't. You always assumed I would stop if you asked. Because I've always done everything

you asked. But I won't do this.'

'You're taking everything away from me,' Aurelle choked out, her voice catching.

'Am I?' Diana stared hard at Aurelle, then turned and stalked away ahead of her.

Aurelle steeled herself and called after, 'You can't do this if I don't allow it, Diana!' There was no response, so she called out again, 'Is it worth all this?' But her voice was swallowed up by the darkness as Diana continued past their home, towards the campus.

Diana, who had heard her, thought, as a stick snapped under her heel, *Yes.*

In the Den, she worked with the kind of furious energy that suited her best, harnessing her anger, turning it into motivation, spinning gold from fury. She thought about Aurelle's face as she'd stared at the stars: her beauty, her innocence, only then contorted into a monstrous selfishness, a childlike whinging. She sketched out plans for paintings, exorcised her anger on canvas as owls hooted outside the Den and the night came alive.

AURELLE WASN'T SLEEPING WELL. SHE stayed up for hours, high on any number of things, then came home late, stalking through the house like a ghost. Opening drawers and cupboards, making herself food and leaving dirty dishes everywhere. Diana, a light sleeper, would wake, heart pounding, and lay there listening: Aurelle banging about, muttering, eventually going quiet until morning.

Marianne came up to RBU without telling anyone. She drove one of the kids' cars so no one would recognize it. She parked in the lot close to the Art Den. She marched into the studio and asked a quiet girl working on an easel where Diana Martin was. The girl opened and closed her mouth before pointing off the main studio to Diana's closed door. Everyone stared. Marianne walked to the door indicated and opened it without knocking. She went in and pushed it shut behind her.

Aurelle was at the cottage, alone. Since the show, the phone had hardly stopped ringing with art magazines, celebrity news sources, art agents and gallery owners trying to talk to Diana and, sometimes, Aurelle. Diana had been wooed by many people from the art world, not just Tracy from the Toronto gallery where she was showing soon. She was often dressed up in tailored suits and red lipstick, her hair brushed and glossy, going off for drinks or coffee or dinner in town. She refused to go back home to Toronto, saying she needed to stay on campus and work, so they came to her. Sometimes, they came and picked her up at the cottage, waiting patiently in the front foyer while Aurelle watched them from the doorway of her room. There had been stories in news outlets and art magazines about the art and design world clashing over one of the members of fashion's first families, about cracks in the façade, about the art world's unlikely ingénue – a college girl who was standing on the backs of her famous friends, but whose skill was beyond her years. She was compared to the Dutch masters, to Cindy Sherman; she was declared to be skewering the very privilege that put her where she was. There were other articles about the MT brand, and whether its unflappable cheeriness was holding up in the new era of irony and satire. Aurelle would bite her lips to bleeding and hide from all of it,

discarding articles around the house like she was shedding skin.

The phone rang now, and she answered it.

‘Is this Diana Martin?’

‘No, I’m afraid she’s out,’ Aurelle said.

‘Aurelle Taylor? I’m calling from the *Washington Post*,’ the man’s voice said.

She said nothing.

‘How do you feel being in the paintings?’ the man powered on. ‘What does your mother think?’

‘I’ll tell her you called,’ Aurelle said, replacing the phone in its cradle, harder than she’d intended, the sound echoing in the empty cottage.

She walked to the front closet and took out a spring jacket, her rubber boots. She left the cottage, walking to campus along the gravel road, her boots kicking up pebbles and making the only noise around her. Keeping her head down, she wondered again what had happened to her little life, her big life, the only one she had. This place; they had thought it would be perfect, hadn’t they? She arrived at campus and looked at the wooden signs, the buildings that had seduced her in their comforting simplicity, their difference from everything she’d come from. The trees were budding. She thought of Diana, growing up summering in this area. This had never been a place for both of them, she knew now; it had always been Diana’s. Aurelle had just been washed along with the tide of Diana’s plans. She was weak, she knew, swallowing a lump in her throat. She was powerless. *The subject of the work*, as she was referred to in articles about the paintings.

She went to the library on a kind of autopilot, knowing that’s where students went, those who were studying for finals. She found a desk and brought out her course materials, but immediately fell asleep at the table, her face pressed against an open book. She had restless dreams that she was studying, that someone was studying her. The afternoon passed uneasily, her body submitting to an uncomfortable slumber, her neck bent at a weird angle, mouth open.

Diana turned when she heard the door shut, startled to see Marianne.

‘What are you doing here?’

Marianne didn’t answer. She looked around the small space, taking in the new paintings in progress, the stack of canvases against the walls, some

turned away. Her daughter's face everywhere: expressions she'd seen and loved since the day Aurelle was born, features she'd witnessed grow and mature. Diana's question hung in the air as Marianne pivoted on the spot and took in the painting Diana was currently working on. She raised a hand and pointed at it, swallowing.

'What is that, Diana?'

Diana lifted her chin. 'The truth.'

Marianne stared. 'Don't give me that bullshit,' she said quietly, her voice sharper than Diana had ever heard it. It caused a ripple in her chest, and she felt her heart beating fast. This woman. She had been like a mother to her. She swallowed nervously in spite of herself.

The painting: a young woman, her hair long, her face fuller than it was now, holding hands with a taller friend, both of them awkwardly growing into their bodies, shedding baby fat for womanhood. They stood in front of the doorway of a red bricked building. *85 Harbord Street*. There was no sign for the clinic, but Marianne knew. There'd be so many photos of the place over the years. Morgentaler.

'Is this... true?' she asked, quietly. Diana said nothing. 'Was it for Aurelle, Diana?' Diana nodded, slightly. Marianne's face contorted, her eyes blinking back tears. Finally she spat, her eyes flashing, 'You have *no* right to do this. That is private! You are stealing her life!'

'Keep your voice down, please,' Diana said quietly, her deep voice controlled. 'And I am not. I'm sharing it.'

'You're *selling it!*'

Diana let out a bark-like laugh. 'You cannibalized your whole family for *Vanity Fair*. You turned your daughter into a handbag! You're jealous because it's my turn.'

Marianne tipped her head back and growled in frustration. 'Jesus Christ. What more do you want? We gave you everything! Wasn't it enough? You are *destroying* her.'

'You don't know her,' Diana said, calmly, gesturing to the painting as evidence. 'I'm sorry, but *that* is the truth. I do. I always have.'

'She is my daughter, Diana. My *daughter*. Why are you doing this?' Her voice breaking. 'For fame? I could have helped you with that. I treated you like family.'

'No!' Diana yelled now, pointing a finger, then calming herself. 'No. You

didn't. You told Aurelle to—' She took a steadying breath. 'I was never like family to you. You tricked me. You took a grieving girl with *no family* and you used her to give your daughter a friend. I was only ever a plaything. A pet. Meaningless. And then you tried to get rid of me once I'd served my purpose,' she choked out, her voice breaking.

'That is not true,' Marianne whispered, shaking her head. 'Not at all. Please, Diana, let us help you both.'

'It's too late. I don't need you.' Diana stared unblinking, her heart beating hard. 'I can have it without you.'

Marianne nodded almost imperceptibly, and walked out, closing the door behind her. Diana waited, then exhaled, doubled over, sobs wracking her body.

She let it subside. She gathered herself, smoothed her hair. Cleared her throat and stood tall.

On her way down the studio steps, Marianne saw Grace McLaughlin approaching. They both stopped, the still air thick around them.

'There's a face I haven't seen in a long time,' Grace said finally, an attempt at levity.

Marianne continued down the steps towards Grace. 'Going to check on your little experiment?' she snarled, gesturing at the studio. Grace opened her mouth in shock, and Marianne continued, a small laugh erupting from her lips, 'I don't know which of you is Frankenstein and which is the monster.' She closed the distance between them quickly. Her voice almost a whisper now, her face so close that Grace could see how it had changed over the years, see the fine lines on the beautiful countenance, so like her daughter's. Her eyes wet with tears. 'Are you getting the attention you always wanted?' Marianne asked. 'People finally noticing little Grace?' She waved her hand around, encapsulating the studio, the buildings around it. 'I'm sure everyone is talking about your newest prodigy.'

'Marianne,' Grace said, her voice calm and still, dismissive. 'You don't understand this world. You never did.'

'I understood plenty. You wanted to be famous and you didn't have the talent yourself so you tried to sink those who did.'

'Who, you?' Grace laughed quietly. 'You were a sell-out even then. The professors who said they liked your work just wanted to —'

‘Oh, save it,’ Marianne said, her face contorted in pain, brushing past Grace and getting into her car and slamming the door. As she pulled away, she rolled down the window and called out, her voice breaking in fury, ‘You are just a sad, selfish woman, Grace, and you don’t even realize what you’ve done.’

Her car peeled away, and Grace closed her eyes against the dust.

Aurette woke up at the library and wiped her face, disoriented. She looked out the window at the waning sun. She had slept the day away. Gathering her books and bag, she left the library.

Marianne haunted her old campus by foot, searching for Aurette. It was a dark, warm night. She looked through building windows, followed the sounds of music to crowds of students who whispered and stared at her. *Where is Aurette?* she asked. *Where is my daughter?* No one knew. Their eyes followed her. Their whispers. *Marianne Taylor. That’s her. The fashion designer. Aurette Taylor’s mom.*

Rounding the corner of the library, she caught sight of Aurette’s spring coat. She was walking away from the building, and Marianne’s heart seized in relief.

‘Aurette!’ she called, startling her daughter, who turned, her hands flying to her chest in surprise.

‘Mom? What—’

‘Oh, honey,’ Marianne interrupted, reaching her quickly, pulling her small frame into a tight hug, her voice catching. ‘I’ve looked for you everywhere.’

‘Why? What’s wrong? Is it Diana?’ Aurette’s eyes wide, panicked.

Marianne started, then held her at arm’s length and smiled tearfully.

‘No, Aurette, honey. I want you to come home with me. I want to get you out of here.’

Aurette felt unsteady on her feet. She briefly closed her eyes. She thought of that one day that started it all, Diana holding her hand in the cool darkness of the Martins’ empty house, telling her she would be OK. It was her lowest point, and Diana had saved her, and Aurette had taken a risk and trusted her. It was the end of something. The start of something. Was it all for naught? Where was all the love and trust now? Her breath steadied. *I’ve got you*, Diana had said. She was so tired. She swayed gently in her

mother's arms.

She heard Marianne's voice as though through a tunnel.

'I don't trust Diana, Aurelle. She's unstable.' Her voice beat on, relentless. Aurelle felt inside her pocket for the little folded pieces of tin foil that held the tabs of acid she'd taken from Kyle's room earlier. She just wanted to fly away, to forget, for everything to be beautiful and fun, to be young and unattached to anything: family, identity, expectations. To be up in the sky, weightless, like the Barrens' stars. To be unknown. And maybe that was what Diana had done with the paintings, she realized in that moment: she had put Aurelle on canvas so she didn't need to be real. She'd taken her burdens away but replaced them with others, absorbed them and sent them out into the world, forgetting to replace her identity with anything, leaving her empty. She was nothing anymore. It was a blessing. A curse.

'She's... damaged, Aurelle,' Marianne said, grasping.

Aurelle's body went slack in her arms.

'Come home, honey. We can go away as a family. All of us. You could transfer your credits to another school. Wherever you want to go. There's more of the world than here,' Marianne scoffed, tossing a hand to encompass the trees, the campus. 'We can take you anywhere, Aurelle. You can start fresh, away from all this, from her.'

'Maybe...' Aurelle said, considering.

Marianne seized the opportunity. 'It will be great,' she said. 'We'll book flights. Pack your things. I can take you away at the end of the week. A bigger school – New York! Or Paris! You love both those cities, remember? No one knows Diana or her paintings there! You could walk away from her altogether.' She grinned. 'I can show you off to the European fashion world at last!' There was the catch. Always a catch. Aurelle would have to play along, play her role. But Marianne and the family would take care of her. School didn't even matter. She was Marianne Taylor's daughter. Set for life. Aurelle nodded slowly, submitting to direction, sinking into the familiarity of her job. She exhaled, dropping her shoulders in relief, defeat. She numbly let her mother prattle in happy relief, accepting her squeezes and kisses. Then, telling Marianne she wanted to walk home, she watched her go.

She waited until she was sure her mother was gone then hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders and began her walk back to the cottage in the

dark.

THERE WAS A CAREFUL SILENCE between the girls once Aurelle returned home, where Diana was making dinner. Neither mentioned their confrontations with Marianne. Each was preoccupied by their own encounter, keeping it secret, wondering if she had spoken to the other as well. A crack opened up in that small thing they didn't share. Through that tiny opening, doubt slipped in and stretched out. They ate dinner quietly, formally. Aurelle went to bed early, shutting her door, something she never did. The sound of it closing with a click surprised Diana. So little did anymore. It made her sit up, pay attention.

And now it was the following day. Aurelle came into the living room in the early afternoon and stood before Diana. She hadn't told her she was leaving, getting away. Not yet. She felt light, liberated, generous. Maybe they could enjoy each other again, these last few days, now that she knew she was going. She smiled at her dear heart, her bosom friend. Her Diana. She held out the two tabs of acid. Diana blinked, surprised, and returned the smile. She wordlessly took one, and Aurelle watched her place it on her tongue before doing the same.

They watched TV for a while.

Diana's mind began to sparkle. She was hardly paying attention and then she heard Aurelle's voice: 'I said, do you want some shrooms, too? It looks like the perfect day for it.' They shared another smile. And was it there? A moment of ease, like before. A moment when it seemed like old times. Two girls. Best friends. Easy. Diana said yes, and Aurelle retrieved them, giving more to Diana than she took herself, a gift. She would give everything to Diana, she thought. Plus, she was smaller. *Tiny*, Diana had called her. Was that out loud? Diana laughed and Aurelle did also.

Hours later. It was evening. The air was warmer than it should have been; the breeze felt stormy, like there was something coming. They lay in dirt. They climbed rocks. They were one person. They were three, they were two. *Diana. Aurelle. Girl*. The fever of the high pushed them together and then pulled them apart. First one, then another, they peeled off in search of the hollows of their own minds. Scattered into the north winds.

Grace McLaughlin wandered through the empty studios, a beer in her hand, shaken by her encounter with Marianne Taylor, her old adversary. She had known, of course, the moment she'd seen that first painting of Aurelle, whose daughter she was. That same face. Her youthful jealousy immediately throbbled again like a reopened wound. She was reminded of their year together, competing for the attention of their professors and peers. The pain of losing burned Grace's cheeks even now. She pushed the thought away, took another drink, looking at the work all around her.

The new students this year were talented, many of them showing promise and potential for a long relationship with the arts. Having one or more outstanding artist in the group often raised the bar for the others, pushing the cohort to prove themselves, and drew the attention of the hard-to-impress upper years as well. They had been working long hours of late so it didn't surprise her that, apart from a handful of students gathered on the steps, they seemed to be taking the night off. She paused in front of a painting Kim was finishing. A matador. It was six feet tall, bold and bright, rendered in large strokes. It was missing something, though, despite the clear drama and energy.

Grace's mind returned to Diana, and she reached into her pocket to retrieve her keys. Knocking first to ensure no one was there, she entered Diana's studio, leaving the light off. The moon shone through the window. *Girl's* face, her faces, stared back at Grace from canvases around the room, so perfectly rendered that they appeared to be breathing, even in the dim moonlight. Her mouth tightened, hearing Marianne's voice in her head. *Sad.*

Recently, Grace had found herself having to defend Diana's choice to paint a fellow student in compromising situations to her colleagues at the school. Especially, it was inferred, one who comes from such an influential family as the Taylors. An alumna of the program with such far-reaching influence. Grace had scoffed at her fellow faculty members, especially those who had only seen the works at the show and didn't even teach in the Fine Arts department.

'Consider yourselves privileged to be debating the appropriate nature of paintings done by one of our own. Shame on you for being tempted to cower in the face of "influence." And please do not force me to say "I told you so" when applications triple next year,' Grace had said, holding steadfast.

There had been a small article in the student paper about the Taylor family, the paintings and whether they were in ‘bad taste.’ Grace was quoted saying, *I would rather, every time, for my students’ work to be in bad taste, rather than simply bad. There are enough bad paintings in this world for a hundred lifetimes.* And, now, as she turned on the spot, looking at Diana’s works, a chill ran up her arms. They were excellent. Horribly, terribly excellent. She wondered, briefly, about the relationship between the girls. Diana was such a reserved, unflappable individual. Such ambition. She was headed straight into the orbit of art fame. Grace noticed a canvas on the floor, facing the wall. She turned it, expecting it to be blank. When she saw that it wasn’t, she flipped it around to fully take it in. A sketched-out plan for a painting of *Girl* unlike any of the others. A wave, a thrill of shock, washed over her. *No*, she thought, *she didn’t.* Diana’s face flashed in Grace’s mind. Her cold, singular ambition. Grace took a long drink, her eyes still on the sketch. She finished the beer, leaving the bottle on a windowsill. She returned the painting against the wall, and left, closing the door behind her.

Aurette felt the warm, near-stormy breeze and was energized. The branches underfoot crackled and snapped as she walked along the waterfront, the world around her a sparkling mist. Anything could happen. Something could happen. She put her hands on a tree and felt its bark, and when she pulled on a peeling piece of it, she heard it sigh. She called out. Was that her own voice coming back to her? *Aurette! Come down here.*

Diana down by the dock. The water lapped rhythmically, rain pattering. She sat in an Adirondack chair and looked up at the sky and the clouds, which moved quickly over the stars. The edges of the trees were reaching up to touch them. They were right, those people who had protected the sky of the Barrens: it was like nowhere else. Like salt spilled across a black table. Quickly covered up by grey clouds smudging across.

A cold breeze rattled the leaves. It started to rain. She thought of Keith. His competitiveness. His jealousy. His cruelty. The water sparkled, animated, rose up, and she could hear him laughing. She strained her ears. Was he happy? Was he angry? Her lips formed his name, her teeth biting down on her tongue at the end. *Keith.*

He dove in. He hit something.

Aurette was at the shore. Diana. On a rock deep in the trees, at the water's edge, where they kept the canoe.

She waved Aurette over.

'Come on, let's go out in the rain,' Diana said, and Aurette saw her old friend, her face glowing with love.

She saw the canoe and paused, remembering. So many perfect days. It all came whirling around her, those memories, like a dust storm. She smiled, missing it all, feeling like a girl again herself, wanting a moment of youth and innocence, of worrying about nothing, planning for nothing. She went to her friend, who held out her hand.

The water was freezing, an awakening. She let out a gasp, a laugh. *Come on, Tiny.* She put one foot into the canoe and it rocked in the excited water. Her other foot slipped on the slick rocks and she tumbled. She gasped. She skinned the top of her foot and fell into the water, pain shooting at her inner thigh as it banged the edge of the canoe. She grabbed the side, her body half-submerged in the freezing water. She looked up, frightened.

Diana laughed and helped her up, into the canoe.

'What are you afraid of? Let's go.' She climbed in herself, the rain spattering around them, making deep *thunk* sounds as it hit the canoe. She pushed from the shore and they were quickly away, the wind moving them far and fast. Aurette relaxed.

Diana. They laughed together at the weather, their faces wet and happy.

'Oh, Diana,' Aurette called out, into the rain, her eyelashes wet. 'I'm going to miss you!'

The lake was loud now, the rain pelting down around them, the sky dark. Aurette tipped her face up and smiled into the raindrops.

'Miss me when?' Diana asked, her voice husky in the rain.

Eyes closed. 'When I go! With my mom... To New York or maybe Paris...' Then she remembered. Opened her eyes. 'Oh!' Her mouth opened and closed. She started to giggle. 'Oh, God. I totally thought I told you!' Covered her mouth. She looked cruel to Diana in that moment, who suddenly felt a fool. Of course. Marianne was taking her away. With the family. Marianne could keep Aurette to herself, push Diana out. Somewhere where Diana was nobody, nothing. Where Diana didn't exist.

She stopped rowing against the current. The canoe moved quickly sideways, the wind pushing the water into angry waves. Her voice carried,

low and clear. ‘You’re leaving?’

The acid, the mushrooms, were making the water appear to be rising around them, swirling in menacing colours, defying nature. The lake, Diana’s own lake, was filled with her rage.

‘Oh, Diana,’ Aurelle said tenderly, seeing her friend’s face. She reached out, standing clumsily, the canoe rocking. ‘You’ll be fine! You can come visit me! I just need to get away, you know?’ Her face an innocent smile, apologetic. Pitying.

So willing to leave her: Diana, who had no family, never had, not really – her mother and father had never cared for her – but who had mistakenly thought the Taylors had counted her as one of their own. She had built herself a reputation from nothing, but it didn’t matter. They would take Aurelle and continue being Taylors somewhere else, and Diana would be left with just her brother’s ghost for company. She would cease to exist for them in every way. She pictured them laughing, Marianne and Aurelle, those twin beauties. Laughing at her as the cameras flashed around them.

Diana stared at Aurelle. Held her chin up, her lip curling just a little, her nostrils flaring. *Leaving. My mom.* She imagined the empty Taylor home – all of them away together, without her – and the silent Martin house next door, her parents so deep in their own lives, thinking nothing of their absent daughter. Her fury and pain flared white hot, and she did nothing to try and contain it. She aligned with it.

Aurelle, still standing, lurched towards her as the canoe bounced on a wave. She was reaching out, rocking. Losing her balance. Diana’s fury seared. She lifted her paddle. In a moment of pure purpose and decisiveness, she swung it across her body, knocking Aurelle fully out of the canoe. In a flash, her friend was in the water, letting out not a single sound as she went over.

In the moment he jumped, Diana called his name. Name the thing you’re afraid of, they sometimes say. Take away its power.

‘Keith!’ she shouted. Her voice strong.

Keith whirled around as his feet left the dock. His body twisted towards the rocks he had grown up diving clear of. That tiny moment, that realization that his sister was there. Like when she had raced down the hill and he’d put out his foot and broken her arm. All the years he had used her

as leverage, as currency for status, as a thing to stand on and make himself taller. Here she was again. He had underestimated how the sheer fact of her presence in the world could make a difference. That even doing nothing, she could change everything.

He went down, crashing into a rock. She walked to the edge of the dock, her body moving her on autopilot, shock. He was sinking, knocked unconscious. Blood filled the water. Bubbles from his mouth rushing to the surface. She stood still. Waiting. Her body numb, unmoving. He looked so small under there, nothing like the bully of her childhood, her life. Air bubbles slowing, stopping. *He hit something.* That is what she would say.

He hit something.

Diana thought it might destroy her. The opposite, in fact, happened. She found that not only was she strong enough to withstand it, but, before long, she felt better. A surge of force, a bold act, followed by a deep sense of peace for orchestrating her own fate. It was the best thing for that difficult relationship, she realised. The only way, in fact, to preserve it.

A drowning person makes very little sound, especially if they are not a strong swimmer. Nothing compared to the noise of rain on a canoe, for instance, or of water churning in a springtime storm. If you don't look, you might not even know.

Aurette was sputtering, her eyes bulging in fear like a frightened animal. Diana put her hand out. Relief flashed on Aurette's face as she struggled to get air. Diana's hand found the top of Aurette's head, that familiar crown she knew so well, had so often kissed. The short hair waving in the water. She ran a thumb over the brow. Aurette's eyes on hers. *My girl.*

Diana pushed down, hard. Wet, weak fingers scrabbled at her arm and slipped – panicky flutterings, impotent splashing. And Diana held firm.

It took hardly any time at all before it was done. The rain still pounded. The sky was the same dark hue. It had only been seconds. So little had changed, and yet so much, too. Diana dried her hand on her jeans. She returned the paddle to the water. Moving. *Leaving.* She rowed in a small circle, waiting, to be sure.

'I've got you,' she said in her calm, low voice. 'I've got you, Tiny. We're fine now, my girl.'

And when she was sure, she pulled her girl out of the water and into the

canoe, into the spot behind her, not looking back once as she rowed to shore.

When the paramedics came, Diana called out to them. *Here! We're down here! Hurry!*

There was nothing to be done, that much was obvious. She was a girl in shock whose friend had drowned. They offered their compassion and condolences and carried Aurelle up the hill the best they could, given the muddy terrain. *She was never good with water.* It was a stumbling, undignified effort, and Diana followed, crying, watching as the ambulance took Aurelle away. Zipped into a bag, strapped to a stretcher. Gone. The paramedics had asked, *Do you have family you can call?* And she had said yes, *Yes, this is my cottage,* her voice softer and more girlish, deferential. Higher, a lilt to it. Catching with a sob. It would have sounded like another girl, familiar to some, had anyone there known. They offered to make calls for her but Diana assured them she would do it herself, and the truck pulled away.

The police were a man and a woman, and they were professional and pragmatic in a way that Diana admired. They had stood back while the paramedics did their work, but now it was their turn. They sat at the kitchen table with her, and asked questions about what had happened.

'We weren't together this evening,' Diana said, her hands still while she smoked. 'I came home and—' Her voice broke. 'I saw the canoe floating away from the shore, through the trees, from the window, and went down to see what was going on. Her—' She let out a sob. 'B-body wasn't far from shore. Just kind of floating. She was so close to home,' she croaked. She wiped a tear and apologized.

Sympathetic nods. 'Do you have an address for her family?' they asked.

'Yes,' Diana said. 'I believe her mother is not far from here.'

The police thanked her, offered their sympathies, shaking hands, telling her they'd be in touch if they had any more questions. Diana nodded. The cruiser pulled away. She watched from the window.

Not long after, there was a pounding at the door. A furious, grief-stricken wail. A mother's pain. A shrieking and hammering.

Diana sat in the dark. She reached into her pocket for her cigarettes, her hands shaking as she lit another one. Eventually the noise let up, and she

heard Marianne leave, her tires kicking up gravel in the rain.

Something else could have happened that day. A different version of events. She had steered it in this way. There were so many ways a story could go. Like a painting. So many different ways they could be finished. You could even let someone else have a go at it. But eventually, you had to take control of it yourself. You just had to choose a version, and then it became yours.

DIANA STAYED AT THE COTTAGE after the funeral for two strange weeks. She drank, smoked, ate the remaining food in the fridge. *I bought this pepper when she was alive*, she would think. She did laundry that included Aurelle's clothes. She was vaguely aware of a life divided: before, after. She drew in her sketchbook. At some point, she began capturing the view of RBU from the cottage, what it was like at different times during the day and night. Long, silent hours, the pencil scratching. She thought of Grace, but did not contact her, and Grace did not reach out. She was not surprised. To acknowledge the real person behind the paintings was antithetical to all that Grace was, what the work meant. Diana's heart ached – as it always had – for love, but she closed herself to the pain. Straightened her shoulders, defiant.

She stood on the upper deck on nights when she couldn't sleep, smoking, elbows resting on the railing. Below, the lake, the lives of Keith and Aurelle. Her ghosts. She loved them more, if possible, in death. Like bees in amber, they were unchanging now. Any worries about what might have been were frozen. She was the solitary architect of her life. She exhaled, the smoke blowing the way of the breeze. Summer on its way.

During the day, the view across the lake revealed the flag at half-mast, a reminder of the college's sentimental outpouring for the loss of a girl it knew only in paintings.

One afternoon, she took her car into campus to return Aurelle's books to the library. It was sunny and damp after a rain. The pebbles on the road kicked up at the car, small puddles splashing in spring-like seasonal cheer. She parked behind the library and took the tote bag of books, lifting it over her shoulder. As she rounded the building, she discovered the *Celebration of Life for Aurelle Taylor* was being held today by the university. Students dressed in all manner of black were filing into the large atrium of the library. Some were crying, their heads bent into the crooks of their friends' necks, their shoulders heaving. She didn't recognize any of them. There was a group of about fifteen students wearing MT clothes, boldly eschewing funereal dress in bright colours, stark whites, loud prints and textured fabrics. One of them noticed Diana standing to the side and reached out a

hand to her as he passed, a grim mask of sympathy on his face. Diana didn't respond, leaving him to turn his gesture into a closed fist of support, his eyes clenching shut momentarily as they moved on. Diana almost laughed. There was an easel propped up nearby with a large, black and white photo of Aurelle. She looked like a Sears catalogue model. The picture had none of her spark, none of her life. Diana gazed at it, noticing a small quote in white cursive font: *For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one (Kahlil Gibran)*. Whoever had planned this likely hadn't thought of the tackiness of choosing a quote that mentioned water, Diana thought, raising her eyebrows and looking around her. Students continued to file in, many looking at her as they passed, turning tearfully to whisper to their friends.

Her eyes roved over the crowd. She was looking, she knew, her heart beating quicker, for members of the Taylor family. She saw none of them, and imagined they were all already seated inside the hall reserved for the event, an entire front row, their arms around the backs of chairs, around each other, as one. The Canadian Kennedys. Fashion royalty. Like the front row of Fashion Week. Music drifted from the hall, and Diana put her hands in the pockets of her long trench coat and moved with the crowd into the room. She chose a seat at the back, close to the windows, to the exit. She folded her large frame into the cheap chair, put the bag at her feet, and crossed her long legs. Soon the seats beside her had filled with students and professors, and they leaned over and told her how sorry they were for her loss. Always considered strange, formal, too unmoving, Diana's personality was finally well-suited to this environment, where she could nod solemnly and turn away. Grief could be used as an excuse for what was, in the end, just her way.

Before long, someone cleared their throat into a microphone at the front of the room. There was standing room only now, the hall full to bursting with strangers. Diana imagined Aurelle sitting beside her, fiddling with a loose string on the cuff of her coat, her eyes flitting shyly around the room. Her heart felt the stab of her absence. Had it been such a short time, their lives together? For so long, it seemed, Aurelle had been her shadow, her spirit, her reflection, her companion. Diana closed her fingers, remembering the feel of Aurelle's small hand in hers. Grief clutched at her tightly. Her breath was short, jagged. Grief, guilt, love, pain. She swallowed, her throat dry and

aching. *I could put you in my pocket*, she used to say to her, and now she put her hand in her pocket, too. *Here you are, with me.*

The person beside her shifted to see the front better. The President of Rocky Barrens was now speaking, her voice strong and reassuring. Diana wasn't listening. She knew the president had likely been briefed on who the girl was, her family, what she had studied. Diana leaned slightly to the right, looking, and she saw them: the Taylors were here after all. Marianne's hair tied up into an elegant twist, fussier than she normally wore. Her husband, her sons, they flanked her, protected her. *There is something about a daughter*, Marianne had said once. Diana saw a small movement: Marianne's head bent in a sob, and one of her boys comforted her, brought her closer.

'She was a poet who loved studying literature,' the president intoned. 'She enjoyed all the many friends she made here at Rocky Barrens...'

Diana's lips turned upward into a smile. *Let's go*, she said in her mind. *Come on, this is bullshit*. She still felt those fingers in her hand. *Come on, Tiny, come on, my girl*. She stood, then, taking Aurelle's book bag, her head high, avoiding the gazes that followed her. Someone opened the door for her, letting her out into the foyer, where she took a deep breath. *There. That's better*. She walked with purpose to the book return slot, where a crowd that couldn't fit into the room was huddled.

'Excuse me,' she said, and they parted, watching her. 'Thank you.' She put Aurelle's books through one at a time, waiting for the *thunk* that told her they'd met the book bin on the other side.

'Hey,' someone said, touching her arm. Diana looked around, irritated. It was Rachel.

'Hello,' Diana said quietly. Rachel reached up and hugged her tightly, surprising her, the gesture reaching inside her somewhere and gripping her heart and lungs. She gasped, her eyes closing briefly and she patted Rachel between the shoulder blades.

'I'm so sorry,' Rachel's muffled voice came to her. 'I'm just so, so sorry.'

And she was, Diana knew. She took this moment for what it was: genuine sadness, from a friend who may not have known Aurelle the way she did, but loved her nonetheless. And it loosened something inside her, and tightened something else. Resolve. She gave a quick smile and left Rachel, her sympathetic and grief-stricken face, behind. The stuffiness of the

building gave way to the refreshing, cool spring air, and she took a gulp, lengthening her strides, moving away, always away.

She parked in front of the Den. So many days and nights here: together, alone. As she walked up the stairs, she found herself speaking to Aurelle again. *We can do this, my girl.* Like when Aurelle had given her the strength, after Keith's death, to return to the cottage. Her delicate way, her lightness, had emboldened Diana, given her purpose. Shoulders back. She heaved open the wooden door, taking in the familiar smells of oil paint, primer, wood, old beer.

There weren't very many students there, but those who were stopped what they were doing to watch Diana. She moved without looking at them towards her private studio. She hadn't been there for some time. The longest she'd ever been away. She put the key in the lock, but, when she turned it, discovered the door was unlocked. She turned her head, catching the eyes of her peers, who busied themselves, and entered. She turned on the spot, taking everything in. It looked the same. Perhaps she had left it unlocked. She very rarely did, but maybe she'd been careless. Had someone been in her space? The sheer thought unsettled her. Everything looked untouched, her many studies and planned paintings still stacked one against the other, her current works on easels. Aurelle all around her in the paintings, that face, that girl. *We're OK*, she thought. *We're fine.* She made note of a beer bottle on the windowsill she hadn't seen before as a voice startled her from behind.

'What happened?'

It was Noah, standing in the open doorway, his face screwed up like he was trying not to cry. 'You were always with her. What happened?' His voice dipped, high, low, cracking slightly like a boy's.

Diana regarded him, regaining control – of herself, of the room. She turned her body towards him, her hands by her sides, and waited. Still. His lips twitched and he tried the same thing. He stood, fingers fidgeting. Diana refused to acknowledge his feelings, his grief or curiosity or accusation. Whatever he was experiencing was of no interest to her.

'She didn't have the strength.' She paused, unmoving, before continuing. 'She died.' She stated this bald fact, watching Noah's eyes blink many times, and she took a step towards him. He stepped back quickly, stumbling.

‘Bullshit,’ he spat. ‘Just like your brother, right?’

Diana stopped, but gave him nothing. Her eyes unblinking. Noah’s eyes flitted away first, looking at the paintings, at Aurelle. ‘You *did* something,’ he murmured. She watched him, her body stock-still, her height commanding.

Finally, she said, calmly, ‘I did nothing, Noah. And you know nothing. Nothing about me. Nothing about Aurelle. And certainly nothing about my brother. You’re a weak person. A gossip. A hack. I don’t know why you spend so much time thinking of us when we have never spent a moment, and I mean a *moment*, thinking of you.’ Noah’s chin wobbled. She continued. ‘And so, if you wouldn’t mind, please get the fuck out of my studio.’

He sniffed and wiped his nose, blinked away a tear and turned. He closed the door with a slam, his only recourse. Diana stood still for another beat, her breath regaining its calm pace. Control. She turned, beginning the business of taking her work to her car. No one said a word to her in the four trips it took to load all of her things: the large paintings of Aurelle, her tools and materials. She closed the trunk carefully. As it shut, she saw another car approaching, then parking on the dirt space in front of the Den. Grace McLaughlin got out of her old Volkswagen and shut the driver’s side door. They were a few yards away from one another. Neither said a word. Grace watched Diana as she got into her car and backed it out. Diana paused before driving away, taking one last look at her professor.

Grace turned, walking quickly up the familiar steps to the Den, the large doors closing heavily behind her.

DIANA'S PARENTS WERE SAD, OF course, and they sympathized, shocked at a tragedy so similar to their own that they seemed even more detached than usual as a means of self-survival. *Your dearest friend*, her mother said in her thin, papery voice in the darkness of her bedroom. *Her poor mother*. Diana was relieved that her parents were so removed from the world that they knew virtually nothing of their own daughter's fame, her success. Over the last few months, they had rebuffed any journalists or photographers who had inquired, directing them to the Taylors, where they thought they were better suited. They paid no mind to any mention of Diana or her paintings. *We just lost our son, you know*, was their response to anyone who called, and they were largely left alone.

They had aged a decade in a year, simply waiting out their lives until the end. They sent flowers next door, but felt it too painful to attend the funeral; it was too close to home. Both houses bereft. Both left with a piece missing. Mutated. Estranged. It was too much for the families to come together. They would always be as they were now.

Diana couldn't stay, didn't want to live in her family home ever again. The Taylors, of course, had shut their fortress to her once more; she was unwelcome, considered a leech and a curse. She knew this from the funeral. Outside, on the steps of the church, Aurelle's brother Matt had spat at her feet, a moment that had been photographed and redistributed countless times in papers and magazines.

And what of Marianne? Her glamour diminished. She appeared, whenever Diana happened to see her – on occasion through her old bedroom window when she visited her parents, or in some newspaper or magazine – greyer, her beauty faded. She was retiring from fashion, it was announced through a family press release. To be with her family. Diana had read this with a characteristic expressionlessness, her fingers shaking just slightly as she jammed a cigarette into a glass ashtray in her studio.

Diana had taken a live/work space downtown. She worked there steadily for six months in preparation for her show. She saw little of anyone except the guy she bought drugs from, having never lost her taste for the piercing tip of exhilaration, the drive she got from a line of coke, or the almost

immediate effects of the right kind of pill.

Her first big show in the city, the thing she'd been working towards for months, was a smash hit. The paintings were sold before it opened. Small red dots in the bottom right hand corner of all of them.

Before she left to attend the opening, Diana applied Aurelle's red lipstick. She pushed it into the grooves of her own lips, the waxy red that had molded to Aurelle's mouth shifting, changing shape to fit her own.

Diana, taller than everyone, did not bend to talk to all those clamoring around her. She nodded, smoking, offering smiles that didn't reach her eyes. She gave little, and it made them love her more. She knew this, of course, choreographing it all. Mystery, mystique, talent. Less, she knew: less noise, less threat, less distraction. Less is more. More control, more power, more desire.

And the paintings: in all of them, every one – Aurelle's face. Aurelle. Aurelle. Everywhere, that face.

Girl. Girl lived. This was the future Aurelle never had. Here, at her college graduation, fiddling with the tassel on her mortarboard. Here, on the subway, the dirty soles of her shoes visible below her crossed ankles, her eyes on a paperback held open on her lap, squeezed by other commuters on either side. Here, sitting across the desk from a large, imposing man. An interview? Here, lying on a lush, expensive couch, asleep, a container of takeout food open on the table beside her, moving boxes all around her. Here, in a canoe, her hand trailing in the water. Here, here, here. Aurelle. Always Aurelle.

A small woman was in attendance. No one noticed her. Grace kept to the edges, avoided the artist. She studied one painting that was unlike all the rest, her eyes returning to it again and again, regardless of where she stood in the room. That painting. She'd seen the sketch of it in the studio the night of the girl's death. Before everything. She knew now it had been a plan. For art. For life. And now, here it was, finished: gleaming in the lush colours and rich layers for which Diana was known. Almost real.

Aurelle's pale, bluish face just below shallow lake water, hair waving around her head in short swirls, eyes open. Eyes directly on the viewer. That face. One could almost hear her laugh. Could imagine her bursting from the surface, gasping. She could have been swimming. She could have

been alive, but there was something lifeless about her. Pale lips. Wide eyes. Artifice. Sacrifice. This painting was always going to happen. Diana made it so.

Grace stared at the face so like the mother's. Marianne, who had eclipsed her in school and then in the world. Girls like Marianne were always given a pass: beautiful, unthreatening, wealthy. Those eyes, the lips, the wide smile: they were so alike, mother and daughter. The features had shocked Grace in September when she'd first seen them on canvas. She wanted to know about the artist, a striking and stoic girl named Diana; she was curious about the potential for the art itself, about the subject. The drama around the work. The fame. As she witnessed Aurelle's fall, her humiliation and degradation depicted in oils, she permitted herself to feel a frightening, delicious vindication. That Diana was a talent unlike any she had ever seen before simply sweetened the pot.

But then.

Grace stole a final look at the painting of Aurelle, dead under the water. She shrank in its presence, cowed by the magnitude, the meaning. She felt a chill come over her. She turned her head and saw Diana, towering over an art critic peppering her with questions. Her eyes rested on Grace, cold and expressionless. Challenging.

Grace blinked. She looked away and, moving quickly through the crowd, hurried out into the night, gulping the fresh air in relief. The painting followed her, reaching after her, into her pockets, into her trembling hands, into her mind.

The crowd moved like a rippling thing, a dance, a rave. All of them borne away on the tide of Diana's success. Those people who grasped their pearls, scandalized at the nerve of the artist, but in the same breath thrilled at the prospect of owning her *Girl*. In one piece, Aurelle's head was thrown back in laughter, eyes closed, hair whipped across her face. Sweat glistened on her forehead as she danced maniacally, radiating heat.

And Diana, like a stoic queen after a war, her head held high, hair cut into a fresh bob, lips red, loomed over everyone around her. Her famously reserved persona an extension of her paintings.

Diana was ushered towards the photographers and interviewers near the doorway of the gallery. They thrust cameras and microphones towards her.

Diana!

Diana Martin!

Diana, why did you choose Aurelle Taylor?

Diana took a drag from her cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly. Her eyes blinked against the lights. She looked above them all. She put a hand in her pocket and squeezed it tightly. *I've got you.*

She opened her red mouth, and she answered.

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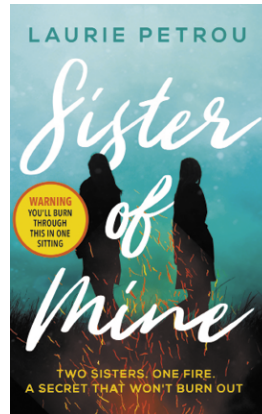
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