

Even just a few kilometres from Shivering Heights there was no foretaste of apocalyptic weather, just a grey gloom and puffs of fog lapping at the car's headlights. As far as Agnes can see, vaporous white patches lie skulking on the ground. They look almost hungry, she thinks, checking her rear-view mirror. The car chugs along at a steady pace, piercing a wall of cloud that closes behind it like a curtain.

For a few moments now she's been so engrossed by these clouds she almost missed the sign for the Nordic spa. Yet they had clearly told her it would be hidden by the forest, scarcely visible from the road. She yanks the wheel, fearing she'll veer into a clump of trees, but her nails dig into the leather steering wheel and she comes to a stop in the middle of a clearing of gravel interspersed with yellow weeds.

There's only one other car in the lot. Bales of fog roll over its chassis and along the ground to the welcome centre, before tumbling down the steep slope to the foot of the mountain.

The dense fog engulfs Agnes's hands while she pulls her bag from the trunk. She came here straight from work, and regrets not putting on something more comfortable. Her high heels sink into the ground, where the leaves that have amassed lie rotting under steady rains. The surrounding forest is a tapestry of pine needles and soaked wood. A muffled roar hints at the steady, truculent flow of the river below.

Tendrils of cold creep under Agnes's clothing and skin and seem to burrow down to her skull.

In her raincoat pocket, her phone vibrates. The office can't live without her any more than she can without it. She'll have to turn off her phone. Gripping her bag tight to stay her shivering hand, she takes a deep breath like her therapist taught her, imagining a great wind of freedom blowing through her, from the inside out.

In the welcome centre, two women are in a heated argument. Behind them, massive windows like the walls of an aquarium magnify the forest below. Breaks in the cloud cover afford glimpses of small cabins and pools of a paranormal blue. Shrouded in shadow and mist, this landscape has a lugubrious charm. The arguing women ignore it. The taller one claims there's nothing to be done: the spa is closed, weather warning, torrential rains. In a raspy voice, the other, whose back is turned to Agnes, asserts her right to stay. Her shaking hands have a curious gleam in the chiaroscuro, as if wrapped in a watery film, or skin so thin and pale it lets a sliver of light shine through. At the sight of the newcomer, the women fall silent. Then the guest's face lights up.

'See! No one got your message!'

The owner doesn't back down. Every guest was informed of the closure the night before.

'But we're here now. You don't really expect us to postpone our vacations?' asks the young woman. She turns and winks at her new ally.

Taken aback, Agnes stares into the face of the stranger before her. Her features are youthful, symmetrical, and clean, except

the pointed, chalky teeth set in her crooked smile. Her round eyes bulge. Her freckled skin seems to conceal nothing of what lies beneath, and on its surface beads of water shine, as if the vapours outside had condensed on her.

‘I’m too tired to get back on the road,’ Agnes concurs.

‘See? We’ll leave if the river overflows. Promise.’

The woman yanks the keys from the owner’s hand and takes her new accomplice by the arm, like an old friend. Agnes notices her eyes: at once splendid and shallow, two small pools shimmering like tiny fireworks.

In Shivering Heights, life is an enigma of water and sky. Rain is frequent. Some days it falls in perfectly formed pearls or drops honed to a knife’s point, leaving nothing visible beyond and no prospect of escape. But there is a peace of sorts at the heart of a downpour so precious and violent. On other days, the showers mist down like gossamer, enveloping forests and outcroppings, snouts and claws. Then the river gains the upper hand, forces mergers, annihilates the delicate invasiveness of the rains.

As Agnes and Heather, the stubborn young woman, sink into the scalding baths of the Nordic spa, the air begins to turn to rain. All around, in faraway mountains and up in tree branches and under the earth in warrens and dens, creatures great and small get ready for the coming downpour. The women are content to watch the fog twist and knot itself before their eyes, hiding and revealing snatches of landscape.

‘I love water,’ says Heather suddenly.

Though it’s pointless, she paddles her arms like fins to stay in place.

‘You’ll see. We’ll be completely new women after this,’ she rasps.

Submerged in turquoise water in the middle of the mountains, Agnes still feels like the stagnant, lethargic woman she has become at work. She inhales, to take in the moment and hold it tightly in her lungs and stomach, but it seems to be constantly dissipating.

‘Are you from around here?’ she finally asks.

‘Not really. You?’

‘I needed to get far away. From work.’

A little laugh pierces the fog.

‘You came to the right place. We’re far away from everything, here.’

Heather’s voice shifts strangely between deep and high-pitched, but she doesn’t seem to care, and shoves her head under the water.

Agnes finds this young woman’s forthrightness dizzying. Such lightness inhabits her every move, her very being, as she dives right into the shallowest section of the water and out again, and traverses the pool with the ease of an undine.

This might all seem less strange if Agnes weren’t emerging from a drawn-out corporate restructuring. In recent months she’s laid off so many people that their tears and sobs have come to seem more normal than the beatific, almost unsettling joy emanating from the bather beside her.

Truth be told, Agnes needs more than a week at the spa; it would take a thousand years of ablutions to rinse off the worries encrusting her body. Her muscles remain tense even as she sinks ever deeper into the hot water. All around her torso and her arms, small whirlpools live and die, leaving a wake of sparkling

foam. Hot steam rises to caress her face. She'd like to fill herself up with emptiness, but she's breathing in less and less air, more and more water. Her skin drips with sweat and vapour.

When Agnes gets out of the water to head to her cabin, Heather follows, bent on further interaction. Soon, in Shivering Heights, two trembling shapes in Lycra bathing suits and flip-flops will make their way through massive clouds of fog. They'll tiptoe along, so small and alone next to the forest and mountains and river and upside-down abyss of the sky, the source of all this smoke.

The two women spend the following day in the spa's many pools, sweating or shivering, shedding dead skin. Without other guests to welcome, the owner leaves them to their own devices, then stops appearing altogether. Eager for new experiences, Heather slips into every bath, tries out the hammam and the sauna. Agnes becomes less disconcerted, learns to be still. Like the herons that sometimes come to rest in the spa in Shivering Heights, or the black bass riding the river's current, she'll drink, and eat, and wait, soaking wet, for the day to pass. Her muscles will relax; her breathing will slow down.

Little by little, the downpour smudges out the borders between spa and forest. In the afternoon, seams of muck seep down from the undergrowth in small furrows, extending their black tentacles into adjacent pools. Under cover of rainfall, Heather strips off her bikini top and throws it skyward. She swims easily, with precise strokes, but there is something forced about the way she stands: erect, shoulders thrust back, streaming water accentuating the contrast between her muscular body and soft, full breasts.