

## Chapter

# ONE

### Dark Thoughts

I'm almost fifteen and I have no friends. If I did, I'd ask them to call me Mira. In Spanish, "Mira" means "look," in fact that's the name for Spain's guide dog foundation. I like it as a girl's name: *Mira, the girl who looks*.

At lunchtime, I eat alone in the cafeteria, then follow the hallways and stairways to the library. The school is a real maze. I find a spot at the back next to the window. Before I open a new book, I glance at the young maple tree growing out of the sidewalk across the street. I love that tree. I love how it's spindly and struggling to survive on its tiny patch of land, sandwiched in between the asphalt, the cars, the bicycles and the pedestrians. Living in what you'd call an environment hostile to the development of life. The tree's leaves have begun to change color. Some have even fallen already.

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Reading is one thing my mother has never stopped me from doing. Ever since I've known that letters make words and that, together, words tell a story, I've borrowed piles of books from the library. I fill my backpack and carry them down to the half-basement on Amélanchiers where the two of us live.

Every night in the back bedroom, lying across the bed, I lose myself in other people's adventures. I turn into a biologist chewing leaves with the gorillas, into a caribou galloping across the tundra, head held high, I soar above the river with the snow geese in April. I hunt through books on zoology, I learn to recognize the different species, their habitats and their calls. For example, moose love to eat water lilies, and they lose their antlers every winter. Incredible! Animals as big as horses nibbling on water lilies! Antlers as wide as a highway that grow back every year!

If it were up to me, I'd read all night every night. But it's not meant to be. At some point, I hear her steps in the hallway. My mother comes in without knocking. "That's enough, Mirabelle."

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At night after I've turned out the light, I cross my hands behind my neck, stare at the ceiling and let my imagination run wild. I dream. Sometimes when I'm sure she's asleep, I get up without making a sound, with nothing but the night-light on. Most of the time, lying there on my back, I stare at the ceiling and the same image always appears: a round little lake surrounded by mountains, a wooden dock.

At the end of the dock, I untie the rope and jump into the rowboat. One push and it floats off. I dip the oars into the transparent water, pull them toward me, the boat moves forward in spurts without making a sound. Very slowly, I float to the center of the lake and drop the black anchor down, down like a rock to the lake bottom.

I sit there without moving. A trout jumps on the surface of the lake. A splash and circles of water fan out in slow motion and disappear. Then nothing. Nothing but silence.

\* \* \*

Today, the art teacher has taken me aside. At school, they call him the birdman because they

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say he looks after birds. I wonder whether he finds hurt chickadees on his doorstep, whether he caresses their ruffled feathers ... Does he fix their broken legs? Does he bury the doves done with mourning at the back of his yard?

“Mirabelle, it’s clear to me you have talent. Your teacher from last year told me about you. Yet you didn’t even bother finishing your assignments on primary color mixing, water-color washes or dry pastel techniques. As though you gave up partway ... What’s wrong?”

He doesn’t know. He knows nothing about me. An invisible hand pushes down on my skull, trying to drive me into the ground.

\* \* \*

My mother is sitting in the armchair, her knitting needles clicking, a big finch-yellow ball of wool in a wicker basket at her feet. I’m standing facing her in the middle of the living room. My hands are clammy. My hands are always clammy.

“I don’t like yellow. I look like a sick chicken in yellow. With my pale skin. I don’t want a yellow sweater for my birthday.”

“Speak up,” sighs my mother. “I can never hear a thing you say.”

I clench my hands into fists behind my back. “I don’t like yellow. I look like a sick chicken in yellow. With my pale skin. I don’t, I really don’t want a yellow sweater for my birthday!”

My mother smiles. “Of course you like yellow, Mirabelle. You will like the color yellow. You already do.”

She goes back to her knitting, a ghost of a smile on her lips. I go back to my room with my hands still balled into fists, my clammy hands, and feel like screaming.

\* \* \*

My bedroom doesn’t really belong to me. But it’s better than it used to be. It used to be we slept in the same room, in twin beds pushed together and, at night, I could hear her breathing. Making dreams impossible.

My mother chose the color for the walls: pale green. My mother chose the quilt for the bed. Chose the bed. The lace curtains on the window. The dresser and its contents. But not my keepsakes on top, my little dog carved out

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of wood and my bird, the buzzard Brenda, with outspread wings. Hanging in the closet are the coats, dresses and pants she's made for me. On the top shelf are cardboard boxes full of knitting, clothes, scraps and balls of wool. I always wear the same thing, black leggings and a black sweater. When they're dirty, I wash them and put them on again. It makes her furious.

\* \* \*

I pet all the cats and dogs I see on my way to school. I think I started petting animals before I knew how to talk or walk. The first time I remember was when the little girl next door held out her kitten by the scruff of its neck and said, "I'll lend her to you, but just for an hour!" I'd barely had time to stretch out my palms before she was racing toward the alley. My mother called her "hyper."

The tabby kitten fell asleep purring in my hands. With the utmost care, I laid her down in a shoebox I used as a bed for my doll. She slept on her side, one paw bent back under her damp muzzle. I covered her fur with a doll blanket my mother had knitted from old scraps of wool, one red stripe, a thinner green stripe, one blue

stripe, one purple stripe, one brown stripe, all odds and ends. She looked so fragile.

I grazed her soft skull with a finger and whispered words of love. I bent over so my ear was just above the many-colored blanket where her stomach made a small bulge that rose and fell with each breath she took. I stayed bent over for a very long time, listening.

\* \* \*

Sometimes at night the image of the lake doesn't appear. I get up and go and stand in front of the mirror above the dresser. I take off the oversize T-shirt I use to sleep in. By the light of the night-light, I peer at my body that's growing like a weed, too much leg, too much arm, skinny hips. I don't recognize it anymore. Which scares me. I examine my miniscule breasts, the right one growing faster than the left, it's got me worried. I don't touch a thing. I watch myself grow. I'm more scared now that my period has started.

\* \* \*

They say the birdman is strict and uses complicated words in class as though he were talking to college students. I don't think so. Sitting at

the very front of the class, I listen to him talk about light and I understand everything he says. I like his voice.

“Fall is the ideal season to observe the spectrum of warm colors ranging from yellow to almost black through the whole gamut of browns, ochres, reds, golds,” he says, showing us the color table. “Look here ...”

Someone knocks at the door; we all turn around at the same time. A girl is standing in the doorway. A girl with a sketchbook under her arm, a palm tree of a ponytail on top of her head, a leather bomber jacket and green-and-purple-diamond leggings topped by a miniskirt and black ankle-high boots.

“Hi,” she says in a rock star’s raspy voice. “I’m new. Is this Hall B, room 230? The art room?”

As though she couldn’t tell from all the easels piled up against the wall, the stools, the color table ...

The boys’ jaws drop open and they forget to close them again. She’s a knockout and her lips shine carmine red. The birdman welcomes

her, and she introduces herself. “My name’s Catherine. You can call me Cath.”

Having said her bit, she sits down in the only open spot, next to me. Honestly, I’d rather she sat somewhere else.

The teacher finishes explaining and gives us our homework: choose a tree with red and gold leaves, “a shimmering tree,” he specifies, and do a first sketch. Then start over with colored pencils or pastels. We have two weeks to find our tree, sketch it and hand in the finished work.

\* \* \*

I’ve always dreamed of dropping by the Stop Café after school. Impossible, I know. She’s waiting at home, her eyes glued to the kitchen clock. Anyway, no one goes to the Stop Café alone. What would I look like sitting at the counter without anyone to talk to? On the boulevard on my way back to Amélançhiers, I can’t help but look through the window. The café’s always full of laughter and conversations I can’t hear in the blue booths lining the window. And the fries are the best in town. That’s what they say in the hallways at school.

\* \* \*

I take the phone book into my room. Because of the girl with the ponytail.

After lunch today, in the library, I tried reading the big book on the mammals of Canada. I couldn't. I kept looking up every thirty seconds or so. On the other side of the window, the young maple tree, the one surviving in an environment hostile to the development of life, was hurt. It's easy to imagine what must have happened. A car must have hit it, and the driver ran off. Anytime I see a damaged tree, it makes me shudder. Cowards make me furious. The ones who don't watch where they're going, the ones who injure trees then leave them to suffer and die. The ones who run away.

So I was in my own world, thinking and worrying about the tree, when a teasing voice behind me said, "I bet you're the kind who's always reading, even the phone book when you can't lay your hands on anything better."

It was definitely her, a pile of magazines in her arms, plowing past without waiting for an answer, her ponytail bobbing and hips swaying. Doesn't she know you're supposed to be quiet

in the library? Why did she talk to me? What does she care what I do?

Fine. The first name in the phone book is Aabi and the last Zywicka. Between the two, there are 1679 pages of names in columns. The names represent people, right? People who walk through the streets, take the bus or the subway, eat and talk and laugh and hold each other, right?

\* \* \*

My hair is long and pulled back in a braid so thick it looks like a rope used to tie up freight ships. When I was little, my mother used to untangle my hair every morning. My hair was golden and as thick as it is now. The braids created waves, and my hair grew so fast you could almost watch it grow.

She pulled the comb through my mat of hair, scraping my scalp as she went. Then she dug a straight part right down the center, plaited the sections into two tight braids and wound an elastic around the end of each one. Sometimes she brought the braids up in a crown on the top of my head.

I cried during the whole untangling operation. I so wanted to have hair like the little girl

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next door who had a cat and laughed and ran down the alley. I never played with her or with any of the other kids in the neighborhood.

When I was little and watched the hyper girl next door, I wondered whether having short hair makes you happy.

\* \* \*

Yesterday it rained. Today, Sunday, my mother is exacting her due. I have to put on the navy blue coat and the mohair scarf, purl one knit one. I hate weekends.

We set off on our walk through the deserted neighborhood. She holds my arm and starts complaining about the neighbors and their noisy children. About the news on TV, nothing but crime and unrest. She worries, too, because of a fashion show she saw on TV this week. She recognized the ivory dress she designed last year, the one with the Peter Pan collar and lace appliqués, and maybe even that lambswool cardigan. Had someone seen her in it? She wore the dress a couple of times last summer. Not the cardigan, though. It stayed in its box. What if “they” were copying her? Just the thought

makes her voice go up a notch. What if “they” were stealing her patterns? You never knew.

I duck my head between my shoulders. What “they”? Who on earth would be interested in Marie Petit’s designs? In her gaudy dresses and ugly sweaters?

I listen, I quit listening, I let myself be led by her, we walk for a long, long time. I stare at the cracks in the sidewalk as they pass beneath my feet. I get lost in the cracks in the sidewalk. I’m a feather-legged buzzard, a peregrine falcon, I soar above the checkered fields, the crop furrows and the creeks, the crevasses, on the lookout for prey.

“Stand up straight, Mirabelle! Why do you always have to hunch over?”

I mutter something, anything, and she grumbles, “Do you do it on purpose? It’s impossible to hear a word you say!”

A neighbor crosses our path, I see his surprised stare. Sometimes I feel like people in our neighborhood point at us behind our backs whenever we pass by. “That’s her daughter! Did you see? That’s the weird lady and her daughter!”

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When I walk with my mother down one block then the next, crisscrossing the deserted neighborhood on Sunday afternoons, I feel like I've got a leather collar around my neck and that, every once in a while, she gives a tug on the leash. "Heel, Mirabelle, heel."