

The Grange

Julie meets with her brother and sister for the first time in years to negotiate the fate of their cherished family cabin. Can their already-strained relationship withstand a decision that will surely let one of them down?

Julie checks her watch and steps down from the streetcar into the early spring slush. Only four-thirty. She is always early when her nerves are on edge. She still doesn't know whose side she will take, but she knows she will be the tie-breaker, hero to one and let-down to the other. The unknowing churns her stomach, gnaws at her brain. Soon, though, they will have made a decision about the Grange, and the thought calms her. Avoiding watery patches in the road, she dashes across the rush of Queen Street and approaches a familiar building.

The Blue Cat Jazz Club spans the ground floor of an old, dingy hotel. Its large blue sign juts out at the building corner like a ship's figurehead. At night, the words LIVE JAZZ glow red in buzzing neon, an electric lodestar beckoning the city's hipsters, but now, in the glare of the late afternoon sun, the place looks plain and unassuming. Julie pulls open the heavy front door and blinks into the dim interior.

"Julie! Is that you? It's been a minute!" Frank Leto, perking up from leaning on a podium near the door, bends forward, arm outstretched for a low five.

"Frankie! Good to see you!" Julie slaps her palm against his, a satisfying clap of skin against skin. The last time she saw Frankie was at her father's funeral, somehow four years ago already. It was too hard to be around music after he died, and she stopped coming by. She forces a smile. "I'm here to meet Nicki and Travis. Still ten bucks for the afternoon show?"

"Nah, no cover for Julie and the twins! You guys are family."

Hearing that moniker catches Julie off guard. It has been so long since the three of them have been together. As kids they used to joke it should be their band name, Julie and the twins, like *Josie and the Pussycats*, and it pleased her to be featured so prominently. Usually she felt like the odd one out. She was the non-twin, younger by three years and lacking a counterpart of her own, like missing a leg.

“Set’s almost over anyway,” Frank says with a wink. “Go on in.” He waves toward the red velvet curtain blunting the tune swirling dolefully through the club. Julie presses a ten-dollar bill into his hand and slips through before he can protest.

She breathes in deeply. The old aroma of metallic brass, sour booze, and a touch of sweat fires up a rusty network of neurons, somewhere deep in her brain, a flickering vision of something familiar, the only mortal route backward through time. She breathes out.

Across the bar, on the small round stage, her brother and three others are lost in a collective journey through some melancholy place. They channel dolour with mouths and feet and fingers undulating in a whirl of valves, pedals and strings. The weekend afternoon sets are sombre and experimental; daytime patrons drop in sparsely, solo, seeking a quiet place to mull something over with a drink and a sympathetic soundtrack.

At five, the musicians will break for two hours before the evening set, and in that time the three siblings will decide the fate of the Grange. Nicole wants to sell. Travis won’t entertain the thought, but can’t afford to buy Nicole out—she’s been paying his third of the upkeep since they became its official custodians. Julie thinks of the place, the old log cabin farmhouse, the towering, now tottering barn, the dilapidated dairy-shed-turned-wood-shed, and cannot imagine life without it.

Travis is the only one who still goes up, but the Grange has always been like a family member, a major player in the story of their lives, as much as Frankie, as much as their mother had been. In some ways, more so. It’s still around. It even has a name, *the Grange*, a title passed down through four generations of Fletchers, honouring its history as an early Ontario farmstead. Most would call it a family cottage, a place to go on long weekends and stretches of summer, but to the Fletchers, it has always been the Grange.

Julie sits at a low mahogany table and orders wine. On stage, Travis sways with dreamy, half-closed eyes. He looks older than his forty-five years, the same long, dishevelled hair, mostly grey now, deeper lines in his brow. His cheeks are two taut bubbles on the exhale, gaunt on the quick inhale, presiding over jowls slackened by time and overindulgence. A double whisky and two empty glasses sit beside him, and Julie suspects there were more before those. His trumpet sings out in little bursts, a high, elephantine riff over the low groove of the strings. The players are surfing, in sync, on the same improvised wavelength, a marvel of human synergy. The music surrounds Julie, gets in her mouth, her hair, and she traces it slowly, in a figure eight, with her chin. It is almost too much to bear.

Her brother has always been a brilliant musician. As kids, he and Nicole both had the gift, picking up instruments in middle school—trumpet for him, bass for her—at the encouragement of their jazz-obsessed parents. Once their mother was gone, though, they ran from the pain in opposite directions. Nicole laid down her instrument forever; Travis surrendered to his. Hours upon hours he played, every day, until his lips bled, until he passed out from exhaustion. Over time, skill became mastery, and he could have made a real living off of it. He almost did.

Julie thinks back to when, in an excited frenzy, he told them he'd been selected for the city orchestra, the real deal, their brass section. They were up at the Grange that long weekend in July, for Canada Day, that hot, sticky time of year when only mosquitoes have the energy to move. Travis hadn't told them he'd auditioned, wouldn't say why he was staying back in the city, coming up a day later than everyone else, and they all worried. He loved the Grange more than anyone. They wondered what could keep him away, even for a day, and hoped it didn't have to do with whatever was making him lose weight, whatever was making him sad around the eyes.

When he pulled up to the farmhouse the next day, rattling down the bumpy dirt road in his beat-up station wagon, running up to the screened-in porch where they were all lounging in shorts and thick films of sweat, he whooped with glee, and their fears seemed overblown. They had called him, he said, he got in, he was going to make it big, he was going to work hard, be Principal Trumpet one day! Things will be different now! Of course, they agreed, Travis *would* make it big—he had true talent—a real gift—not depressed, just twenty-two—partying a little too hard—not the same as Mom—once he got the orchestra job, he’d settle down—and they celebrated with beers and a bonfire late into the night.

That same weekend Julie lost her virginity. She’d been seeing Dave a little while, not too long but not too short either, and, caught up in the celebration, the relief, it seemed fitting. It was as good as anyone could hope their first time to be—to do an intimate thing in an intimate place you know every corner of, a place that had sculpted you into yourself, adventure by adventure, adding another one to the list now felt right.

The morning after, Nicole discovered them in bed and glowered at Julie. Dragging her out of the room, she laid into her. “You’re too young!”

“I’m nineteen!”

“Did you at least use protection?”

Julie avoided Nicole’s gaze and shrugged. She had been too preoccupied to worry about such things.

“Unbelievable. Julie, you have so much potential. Don’t waste it. Don’t be like Travis.”

Nicole looked stern, but Julie detected something else, not anger, in her dark eyes.

“Travis got into the orchestra, Nicki! He said things will be different now.” Julie’s eyes stung; why was her sister being so miserable? They should be happy for their brother.

Nicole stared at her. “I am Dad’s daughter, and Travis is Mom’s son. Do you understand what I mean?”

Julie nodded, but she didn’t understand. “Whose daughter am I?”

“I don’t know,” Nicole said quietly.

Later on, lolling on the couch, stoned, Travis defended Julie’s relationship with Dave. “Aw, Nicki, let Jules have her fun! Life’s about the good times!” Miles Davis played softly in the background from the old record player in the corner, and Travis mimed the valve positions with his fingers, up and down, like a little game of whack-a-mole. He stayed there like that all night and made pancakes for everyone in the morning before going to bed.

Now, half a lifetime later, Julie is not sure who Travis was really defending that night. The thing with Dave didn’t last, of course, and neither did the orchestra gig. Too many missed rehearsals, bleary-eyed fits. Julie considers the trajectory of their lives, radiating from a shared origin—her own has been peaceful enough, though lonely. She always thought she would have kids, but two cats and her teaching job will have to do. Travis’s, a montage of glory and squalor. Nicole’s, a luxury hotel room—stark, orderly, composed.

“Jules, hi.” Nicole’s steady voice coaxes Julie out of her thoughts. She is in a pinstripe blazer, pencil skirt and pumps, her straight dark hair a perfect bob, no strand daring to stray. She resembles a stock photo of *corporate woman*.

“Nicki!” Julie stands and embraces her sister. She inhales Nicole’s scent, searches for the familiar notes under the cloak of expensive fragrance.

Nicole orders a dry martini and sits. “So. Are we ready for this?”

Julie winces. “We can’t sell it, Nicki. Can we?”

“We have to. I won’t spend the rest of my life paying double so Travis can have a good time.”

“There must be a way to keep it.” Julie finds herself arguing Travis’s side in his leave.

“Why, though? None of us have children—no one to pass it down to, no picture-perfect childhoods happening there right now. If we sell it, a family with a future can fix it up, make new memories.”

Julie falters. “What about renting it out?”

“The place is in disrepair. The barn is about to collapse. Jules, mice are taking over because no one ever goes there anymore. There is no hot water.” Nicole’s voice is pained. “Maintenance costs money.”

“I know,” Julie says, throwing back her wine. “I know. But, don’t you love it there?”

Nicole’s eyes shine. “Of course I do,” she says softly. “It’s my favourite place in the whole world. Do you remember that time we went on a treasure hunt at the beach and found those rocks with pyrite? Travis was convinced it was real gold!”

Julie smiles and nods.

“I kept one. Use it as a paperweight, of all things.” Nicole laughs. “It reminds me of the good times, you know, when we were kids. Before mom...” Her voice trails off.

“There can still be good times, Nicki. We can fix it up and go more often. Find more fool’s gold!”

Nicole shakes her head. “When dad died, weren’t you shocked at how little was left for us?”

Julie bites her lip. Their dad was a hard worker, a man who believed in self-sufficiency, frugality, resiliency, all those principles Nicole had soaked up like a sponge. It had astonished all of them, when everything was said and done, the paucity of his estate. “Well, yeah. Of course.”

“He lent a bunch of money to Frankie a few years ago, and then some more a few years later, and never got any of it back.” Nicole’s gaze is steady. “Spent it on gambling. And this place.”

She gestures around at the Blue Cat. “Our inheritance. I won’t make the same mistake.”

Julie’s eyes widen. “Why didn’t he tell us? Why didn’t *you* tell us?”

Nicole shrugs. “What good would it have done?”

There is a silence, each sister wondering what the other is thinking.

Julie’s mind suddenly floods with visions of the Grange. She is small, four or five, walking in the forest, up the snowy hill, flanked by a twin on either side holding her by the mittens. Their mother, a few paces ahead, stops, turns around slowly, her eyes large, excited. She holds her finger up to her mouth, *shh!* She points. There is a moose in the clearing. Two of them! A moose mother and her calf, eating twigs. Their own mother trembles with delight.

She is older, twelve, crying in the wood-panelled bathroom, ladybugs everywhere. There’s an infestation this year, the first summer without their mother. There is blood. She knows what it is but not what to do. A knock at the door. *Jules, it’s me. Let me in.* Nicole has a pink square in her hand, shows Julie how to unwrap it, peel the white thing off, place it correctly. Its wings are outstretched, as though asking for a hug. The next time they go up, they have to vacuum a million ladybug carcasses off of the windowsills.

They are up for Christmas. They are adults now, living separate lives, but their father insisted. The wood stove burns hot, an ancient cast iron kettle steaming on top for humidity. Julie and the twins are rummaging through all the old stuff. Each room is packed with relics of Fletchers past—sewing shears, stamps from 1899, a cap-lock pistol. They excavate old photos from a dusty box, pull out a small green book labelled AUTOGRAPHS. Nicole reads from its

pages, the voices of their grandmother, her long-dead friends. *Billy is my one true love*. They laugh and laugh; their grandfather's name was John.

The music stops. Julie is in the Blue Cat with Nicole, and Travis's set has just finished. He ambles over, eyes glassy, arms outstretched.

"Nicki! Jules! C'mere you two!" They embrace him, then sit around the table, an equilateral triangle. Nicole folds her hands neatly in her lap. Julie fidgets. Travis leans back, comfortable, arms crossed, and grins. "We can't sell."

"Travis, I won't keep paying for you." Nicole crosses her own arms and gazes at him. Travis looks at Julie.

"I—I just don't know." Julie's cheeks are wet.

"We can't sell," Travis repeats. "Donna's pregnant. I'm gonna be a dad! My kid's gotta grow up at the Grange! Things will be different now." He takes a satisfied sip of whisky.

Nicole stares. Julie tries to smile, to mumble a congratulations, but the words stick in the back of her throat.

The Grange hangs between them, a collection of memories, strung out in a row like fresh white sheets on a clothesline, glaring in the sun.