

## Amelia's Entry

The landscape unsettled her. It awoke a longing deeper than memory. Gazing at the woods and the lake she felt out of place in her world, that she belonged here, inside the painting.

Not that Tom Thomson offered her any kind of refuge. The scene was impenetrable—a dense compaction of birches, lake and granite offering no rest for the eye and no space for a deer or even a muskrat.

The longer she gazed at it the more unsettled she became. *In the Northland* disturbed and intrigued her, as did the artist's death over a century ago.

How to account for seasoned woodsman upending his canoe on a still lake and drowning? After discovering his empty boat a week later, locals hauled out the waterlogged corpse of the celebrated painter. A stroke? An aneurysm? There were even rumours of foul play.

She imagined his spirit moving through these latticed birches and across the lake to inhabit the distant wood. The gentle face and soulful eyes she observed in his photographs had touched her heart and, because she was a dreamer, she fantasized about him.

Transforming his finest work would be her tribute.

*In the Northland* would serve her floral creation perfectly, but she had first to determine its focal point. Somewhere in that congested setting of in-your-face birches, amber rock, and cerulean blue lake she must find her point of departure. The McMichael contest required entries to *interpret* and not merely *replicate* a Group of Seven painting. The first prize of a thousand dollars—literally a grand prize—was out of her reach, she supposed, but six finalists would have their work displayed at the Kleinberg Gallery on Canada Day weekend. She felt she had an outside chance, for she had always imagined beyond what she saw.

*Northland* spoke to her, while other Group paintings failed to inspire. Some reminded her of frozen desserts—translucent mounds of sorbet and sherbet. Tom Thomson's work transported her back to childhood days in Algonquin, the rustic family cottage by the lake, her diving rock, the simple canoe tethered at the dock. She spent those idyllic summers roaming the woodland trails alone, reinventing herself as famous women from her history lessons. Little Amelia Renfrew now reincarnated as Pauline Johnson, Emily Carr, and Prudence Heward, declaiming their free spirits aloud to the rocks and trees.

Young people today created virtual alternatives in cyberspace, whereas she had spent her childhood escaping into imagined worlds that were somehow more real than the one she inhabited.

She remembered her sadness when September flecked the woodlands with its crimsons and ambers, signaling her family's return to the city. And her distress when her parents sold the cottage—too involved with work now, they said, to be away for a month in the summer.

Too involved as well to know their daughter, they were surprised when she applied to theatre school. "Really, Amelia? Dear girl, how will you ever manage on a stage?" It wasn't only the job uncertainty that concerned them, she knew, but her shyness as well, another kind of insecurity.

Yet she lost all reserve whenever she imagined being someone else. And she made a decent stage career of it for several decades until a sudden stroke of her own brought it to an end.

With her parents already deceased, she sold the family home in Toronto, bought a small townhouse in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and withdrew with her cat.

Studying the painting, she pined for Algonquin, so far away now, and so long ago.

Should her floral creation reach the finals, she would have to keep the blooms fresh for the Canada Day weekend. They had already survived the afternoon's sweltering drive home from the Exotic Garden Emporium in Oakville.

She had grown anxious on the Skyway with traffic backed up for nearly an hour. Her precious flowers breathed the exhausts of a thousand idling vehicles while she stared out at the smokestacks spewing their poisons over Hamilton Bay. Across the lake she could see the watery dissolve of Toronto's skyline, shimmering in a haze of pollutants. A toxic aquarelle.

But she arrived home with even the cymbidium orchids intact and removed them all to the conservatory. The sun had dipped below the treetops, allaying the fierce heat of the day. Derek from the hardware had delivered the base for her project—a small driftwood stump he had hollowed out and sanded for her.

After calling to thank him and arrange for his payment she panicked, thinking she had invited Jacinta to lunch the next day. She needed the day to complete her project and upload her photos by the midnight deadline. Checking her calendar she saw that lunch with Jacinta was the following day.

She would share the finished collage with her dear friend. Amelia had grown to love Jacinta like a sister and, having no family of her own, had quietly made her a beneficiary.

No one at the Garden Club knew of Amelia's intent to enter the competition. They hardly knew *her*. She rarely spoke at club meetings, being a little intimidated by the aloof savoir-faire of its leading ladies.

Etta Pomfret, whose name made Amelia think of high tea, sat on the Conservation Authority board and was married to the Lions Club president. Penelope Swinburne was treasurer of her family foundation that sponsored the town's annual bid for Prettiest Community in

Ontario. Ingrid Ottoman was Garden Club Chair—a risible coupling of name and office that no one else appeared to notice. All three ladies had won regional awards for their floral art, achievements duly recorded on a brass plaque in the clubhouse lobby. They would be going for gold in the McMichael competition.

No matter.

If her *Northland* arrangement made it to the final, and she was invited to attend the gala, she would ask Jacinta to stop by and feed Alfie.

After covering the dining table she laid out her foam blocks, cutters, and the driftwood base ready for morning. Then she poured a glass of wine and sat on the sofa with Alfie beside her. Dinner, when it happened, would be a small cheese platter with salad; she had little appetite in summer anyway.

Tonight she needed a distraction—*Ladies in Lavender* with Judi Dench and Maggie Smith. She adored both actors and had once fantasized about performing with them. Maybe a Rattigan or an Ayckbourn. But that was before her stroke. It happened in the middle of what turned out to be her last appearance—*Arms and the Man* with the Caravan Playhouse in Toronto.

Catherine Petkoff was about to ask the Serbian officer to depart—*You must leave the house at once*—when she felt her right arm tingle and her face go numb. After she blacked out, the Serbian officer had to improvise his way to an unscheduled curtain. It was Mrs. Petkoff who had to leave the house at once, rushed by ambulance to the ER at Sunnybrook.

After several days of blood work, scans and an MRI, Dr. Shukla told her she had suffered a transient ischaemic attack that, remarkably, left no serious damage. “You could have been paralyzed down your right side, Ms. Renfrew, and rendered even incapable of speech.”

“A stroke of luck then,” she said, smiling.

“That is a way of putting it,” he replied with a nod. “You will need a month of physio and then we can discuss your return to the stage.”

But the attack had impaired her memory and she could no longer trust herself with a script.

Her newly refurbished bungalow provided a cozy retreat with a view of the Niagara gorge through a corridor of aspens.

But after a year of tending her garden, reading her novels, watching films, and cycling the lanes in fine weather, she grew distracted. “Bored out of our tree, aren't we, Alfie?” she said to him one evening.

She volunteered to usher at the Shaw Festival, something that would enable her to interact with people without drawing attention to herself. Jacinta Putnam, the kind and personable HR, interviewed her, and raised an eyebrow when Amelia told her she had acted professionally. Would Amelia consider being a voice coach with the company? “Tell me where you would rather be, Ms. Renfrew, front of house or backstage?”

She was quite content to greet audiences at the door, hand out programs and watch the shows from the back of the theatre. Seeing the actors perform didn't make her envious. They were all so accomplished, and the productions flawless, but she felt no urge to return to the stage.

After they became friends, Jacinta encouraged her to get out more and meet people. “You're an attractive woman, my dear—intelligent, funny, and always yourself. We must find you a decent man.” Her dark eyes twinkled with mischief and her Barbadian accent became more pronounced when she grew animated.

"I've never been a mixer, Jas, and I'm too set in my ways now to want a partner." She laughed. "Anyway, I have you for a friend. And Alfie. He's decent enough, low-maintenance, house-trained, and he adores me."

"He's a cat."

"Exactly. What more do I need? I don't even have to walk him."

But her friend was insistent. What about Pilates?

"I cycle in summer and do my yoga at home in winter."

Lawn bowling?

"Jacinta, really."

The walkers?

"You mean the talkers? No thanks."

Bridge club?

"I'll go it alone—no clubs. That's final."

But it wasn't final. On an impulse that surprised her, she signed up for a floristry course, then joined the Niagara Garden Club and became an inconspicuous member.

Two things happened on that Victoria Day weekend to give her pause.

Observing the elegant couples in period dress stroll through Old Town against a diorama of pampered lawns and symmetrical gardens, she asked herself how did this happen. How had Amelia Renfrew, the wild and solitary child of those remote Algonquin summers, come to live in a place of such suffocating propriety?

Later that weekend, she read about the McMichael competition in the local paper.

The movie at an end, she switched off and went into the kitchen to clear up her dishes. Then she took out her foam blocks and sliced them to fit inside the driftwood base. Leaving them in the laundry tub to soak overnight, she fed Alfie and retired.

Early next morning she set to work.

She drilled seven holes into the driftwood at different angles for her knurled white twigs, so Tom Thomson's birches would not grow uniformly straight. Once they were installed, she threaded a slender black twig in the spaces between them—his fallen sapling, its diagonal path defining the focal point exactly where it intersected the line of birches.

In and around the trees she laid out her orange-encrusted rock in bright begonia, gerbera daisy, marigold, and ranunculus. Three pheasant quills embedded in the flora provided a hint of tree shadow and fault lines in the granite.

She composed her lake from a medley of delphiniums, sea holly and cymbidium orchids, the blues mesmerizing in their depth and richness.

Beyond the lake she teased out her distant woods in a loose spray of orange coral bell and coleus, then wove in accents of crushed Chinese lantern.

A textured backdrop of forget-me-nots, imperial blue plumbago and lobelia blooms became her sky.

Pruning and clipping, twisting and weaving the plants into place she lost track of time. It was nearly four when she looked at the clock. She stepped back from the table and studied her creation, moving from side to side to view it from every angle.

It had taken on a life of its own—the burnished rock and slanting birches, the lake and distant forest, all rooted in the life-sustaining driftwood base. Algonquin breathed before her, its

tight assemblage of wood and stone and water infused with the spirit of Tom Thomson himself, immortal artificer of the Canadian north.

It was time to celebrate. She poured a glass of wine and sat out on the back deck, keeping an eye on Alfie, with the two yellow finches at her feeder. A gentle breeze stirred when the sun dipped behind the tall cedar hedge in her neighbour's garden. After finishing her wine she went back inside to photograph her display in its prime.

But the moment she entered the dining room she sensed that something had changed. Looking closely at her arrangement she perceived a sadness about it—the lobelia now not so blue, the coral bell crimpling slightly, like its autumn had already begun.

For all its perfect beauty only an hour ago, she perceived now in her work intimations of its own mortality. It all seemed utterly, harrowingly pointless.

She put away her camera and sat at the kitchen table looking out at her garden.

What had made her do it? A need to impress upon an indifferent world and the self-absorbed ladies of the Garden Club that Amelia Renfrew still mattered? To persuade herself that she did?

After a troubled night, she rang Jacinta. "I'm so sorry, Jas, but I can't do lunch today. I have to be out of town for a few days."

"Oh Amelia, is everything all right? What's going on?"

"I—I'm seeing someone. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

"You've met someone? For real?"

"We'll see. But would you look in on Alfie while I'm gone?"

"Of course, my love. You need never ask."



“He loves it when you take care of him.” She laughed. “He refuses to purr for an entire day when I come home. And you must let him out. He won't run off when he knows you're around.”

“I'm so excited for you, dear Amelia. You must tell me everything when you return.”

“Thanks Jas. You have my key. Oh, and happy Canada Day when it comes.”

Entering the house that evening, Jacinta was immediately drawn to the display on the dining table. The bright blooms and lush greenery so intricately woven.

Then she noticed the framed colour print mounted on an easel in the corner. Why had Amelia not said anything?

Alfie moved in and around her ankles, rubbing against them and purring, but she couldn't take her eyes off the display. It would have to be watered. She would call Amelia for instructions.

But when she entered the kitchen and saw the cellphone on the table she frowned. She had no way to contact her friend. A little troubled now, she fed Alfie and refreshed his water dish. Then she returned to the dining room to examine the display more closely.

How real, how inconceivably real it was. Edging nearer, she imagined it almost breathing. It seemed beyond real, more a conflation of time, of space, of mind. If she gazed long enough, would she again see what a moment ago had distracted her? A shadow, was it?

Something moving through the birches.