

PORTRAIT
OF A
PRINCESS

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THE ARBOUR ARCHIVES: BOOK ONE

SAM BAKER

For Raven and Thomas

CHAPTER ONE

I sat in the back seat of our family car, on the left hand side. I always sit on the left hand side. My parents think it's because I'm left-handed and my brain secretly tells me to go left all the time, but I have an explanation that makes more sense to me. I always choose the left side because when we go for drives, it's the side that always has the best view.

You could argue that the right side is the same, but I know it's not. The view on the right is always a chaotic flash of passing cars going in the other direction. It's hard to take in the unfolding landscape and its potential beauty with such distractions. In comparison, the left side offers me a calm, almost unbroken view of the world which I find much easier for my sketches.

I can focus on mountain ranges in the distance for as long as I like. Only the occasional tree or power pole will briefly appear before my eyes and remind me to stop gazing into the world for a small moment so that I can continue the attempt to translate the image before me onto my sketch pad.

The rest of my family will soon sit in their usual spots too. Mum, in the passenger seat in front of me; my little brother, William, on the right hand side, behind Dad, who always drove, regardless of where we were going. Dad said it was calming for him and it provided a

distraction from his wandering thoughts. He always seemed to be stressing about something, but when he drove, he was like a new person. He had such concentration and power behind the wheel, which made him forget about his worries for a while.

Mum loved how happy driving made Dad and, as a passenger she had more time to focus on her embroidery. She was always creating beautiful depictions of places we had been. Selling these embroideries was what allowed us to afford our extra art supplies; pencils and sketch pads for myself and tubes of paint for William. He preferred to paint with nothing but his hands, and he was well supplied with blank canvases and old papers to keep himself busy. Our family was always producing beautiful works of art, representing how we saw the world in different but equally beautiful ways.

I was working as quickly as I could to sketch the scenery I saw from my window. I knew this might be the last time, for a long while, to see the place I had called home for the first 12 years of my life. Dad was still working hard to fit our bags and the last of our precious art supplies into the car's boot, while Mum was doing the last rounds through the house with my little brother to make sure we didn't forget anything.

I had done my own quick search, but I thought it more important to take up my seat in the car and document this moment in my life. I loved our home; an old brick house with a big front yard for playing games and a flower garden that would make even the best gardener jealous.

Mum had spent most of her time caring for the plants. They had always provided us with perfect specimens for drawing, painting, and embroidery. We would sit for hours in the sunshine while Mum sipped tea and my brother and I created our best interpretation of the chosen subjects to be displayed on the many wooden mantles throughout the house until newer, more detailed creations were produced as we advanced our skills.

We were all excited about our move. When Dad told us we were

leaving he had said that the city was no place to raise children anymore. He disliked technology; it made him worry that the world was relying more and more on mobile phones, computer games and television.

It made him visibly anxious when he saw children paying attention to nothing other than their brand new iPhone or tablet, ignorant to the world around them as loud music or YouTube tutorials blasted straight into their heads. That was always his main arguing point whenever William or I asked him for a tablet too. Though we wanted it for nothing more than to assist with our own art, he vowed that he would raise us to not just be 'in' the world, like other children, but to be involved in it.

For him, technology was killing real art. Every song, image, video, could be altered digitally to appear completely perfect. It removed imperfections and uniqueness, the real heart behind a piece. He despised that you could travel the world from a screen in your lap, rather than taking in the real beauty through your own eyes, nose and ears.

For this reason, Mum and Dad had put a lot of effort into giving us the best quality education they could at home, rather than sending us to a normal school with spoilt kids and complacent teachers. We still had plenty of social time to make friends and play with other kids, but I appreciated the time spent with Mum and Dad on the weekends at the local markets. Mum would sell her embroideries and fresh flowers produced from the garden. Dad would sell his woodwork creations and often accept contracts to make repairs at homes and businesses.

The markets were in a small park in the city. There would always be plenty of other kids running around, playing tag, building sandcastles in the sandpit, climbing the trees, or watching videos together on their phones. I tried to avoid the children on their phones as they were often too lazy to want to play with us or thought we were strange for not going to a 'real' school.

A few loud bangs interrupted my concentration. Mum, Dad and Will were in their respective places and had shut the car doors. I looked down at my sketch, proud of what I had done. The reds and browns of the high brick walls and the dark greys of the roof tiles contrasted the azure sky at the top of the page, all balanced with the calming green of the front lawn, broken by the occasional pop of colour from Mum's flowers.

Mum breathed a sigh of relief and checked we were strapped into our seats. We were given one last chance to absorb what had been our home, art studio, and school. Dad turned the keys in the ignition and the car shuddered to life. We were on our way. Once the city fell further behind us, the exhaustion from packing all morning began to take its toll.

Will was the first to close his eyes and succumb to the welcoming embrace of sleep, his head resting on the back of his seat, mouth wide open. He was no doubt dreaming of candy, pretty colours, or whatever else it is that 6-year-old boys dream about. The next to fall asleep was Mum. I could tell because her head tilted to the left for a while before coming to a rest on her window. Her beautiful wavy blonde hair created a thin layer of comfort between her head and the cold glass. It wasn't long after that I could feel my own eyelids getting heavy; my thoughts played with the idea of what awaited us at the new sanctuary we were headed for; this new playground, this new canvas.

'Amelia... Amelia!'

I was awoken by Mum's voice calling my name.

'Amelia, we're here; welcome to our new home,' she said.

My eyelids were heavy, and I winced as I tried to open them, the bright afternoon sun making it difficult to see. I rubbed my eyes for a few seconds as they adjusted to the brightness. When I opened them, I noticed the colours of our old house stained all over my fingers; my depiction was now ruined.

Dad and Will were already gone, and Mum had just stepped out

of her seat. I undid my seatbelt, collected my fallen pencils and sketchbook and put them into the little pocket in the front of my dress before opening the car door and stepping out.

The thick grass was soft and welcoming once I placed my feet down. I could even feel some lingering warmth from the sun that had been absorbed into the ground as it stretched across the sky, soon to disappear over the horizon until its return the next morning.

It was quiet. Really quiet.

I couldn't hear any vehicles driving by, no neighbours yelling at each other, no children running down the street, screaming; the only sounds were the wind blowing through some nearby trees and the occasional call of a passing bird. I struggled to take in the new surroundings, overwhelmed with the beauty of everything. All around, no matter where I looked, was green grass and tall eucalyptus trees. Fruit trees lined the driveway; the closest ones I could see were filled with mangoes. It was late in the year, which Mum said was the best time to eat them.

The driveway disappeared over the side of the hill in the distance, overshadowed by the silhouette of a mountain range on the horizon. As soon as it was light enough the next morning, I wanted to be out here at the end of the driveway, sketching the wonders before me.

'Well, Amelia, what do you think?' Mum said behind me.

I couldn't bring myself to look away from the landscape, even though I knew it would still be here to look at for a long time to come.

'Are we in Heaven, Mum?' I said.

She let out a giggle.

'No, my dear, but I think we must be pretty close.'

I instinctively reached into my dress pocket to retrieve my sketchbook and pencils.

'Sweetheart, why don't we leave the drawing until tomorrow? I promise, first thing after breakfast, you can go exploring and can draw as many sights as you care to fit into your book. For now, you and Will should go and explore the new house so you can pick out

your bedrooms while your father and I unpack the car.’

I forgot about wanting to draw as the excitement of being able to pick my room overtook my thoughts. I pulled my hands from my pocket and spun around to face the house.

I called back to Mum as I jogged away, ‘I’ll go find William.’

A huge hedge, twice as tall as me and so thick that no light seemed to be able to penetrate it blocked the view of the house as I got closer. Right in the centre of the hedge was an open door, under an arch carved through to the front yard. William and Dad stood in the middle of the opening, arms outstretched—Dad’s fingertips touching the leaves on either side, no doubt impressed with how thick and fortress-like it felt.

I raced over to them both and hugged Dad’s waist; he knelt and put a hand on Will’s shoulder, his other hand grabbed mine and he squeezed gently.

‘Isn’t it beautiful? I think we’ll all be very happy here,’ he said.

I grabbed William’s hand and pulled him forward. Before Dad could react, we had leapt from the archway in the hedge and were running down the small garden path towards the house.

‘Where are you two headed in such a hurry?’ he shouted after us.

Without slowing down, I shouted back, ‘Mum said we can pick our rooms!’

He laughed loudly before calling after us. ‘Very well; tell us what you find over dinner.’

William’s expression told me he was just as excited as I was. We had almost reached the front door when I heard Mum shout.

‘Children...’

We both stopped and turned back; our parents were standing under the hedge’s grand archway.

‘Yes, Mum?’ I shouted back.

They looked at each other, the love and happiness as clear as day in their eyes. After a quick pause, they looked back at us and as though rehearsed, they began to speak at the same time.

‘We love you very much.’

William and I looked at each other and then back to our parents. Dad had his arm over Mum’s shoulder, her head resting on his collarbone. The late afternoon sun shone through the open doorway where we had left Dad, turning them into a perfect picture silhouetted by the golden sunshine.

‘We love you too!’ we shouted back before turning around and resuming our sprint towards the front door.

We stopped at the bottom of the three steps leading up to the door. Our mouths opened so wide in surprise that our jaws must have nearly touched the ground. Before us, stood the largest door either of us had ever seen in our life, it was as wide as it was tall and was made of two doors that would allow you to open just the left or just the right side, or both at once.

It didn’t have square corners like most doors, the bottom was flat, and the sides curved towards the top to make it look like a huge half circle. Both sides were intricately carved with patterns that distracted the eye. I followed some of the patterns and got lost in the squiggles and lines that swirled and danced as if they were alive.

The white stone walls that framed the entrance were old and pitted and held stories of their own. The cracks and pits provided perfect climbing points for the emerald-green vines which cascaded from the bases of the upstairs windows and flowed down to cover the walls. They made it look like the windows were crying.

I whispered to William. ‘Shall we?’

He smiled and nodded.

We approached the double doors, the ancient handles awkward in our hands. They hung off the door like large earrings, big enough to stick a whole hand into. We pushed with all our might, and the heavy doors creaked and groaned before giving way into the empty space of the entrance hall.

CHAPTER TWO

The space before us was just as impressive as we had seen outside. The doors opened into a spacious room with large stone slab floors that matched the charm of the outside walls. The afternoon sun cascaded into the void through two large stained-glass windows above the great door, the light through the windows reflecting coloured shapes of all sizes on the otherwise lifeless floor.

Directly opposite the large doors was a double-sided staircase, one end starting to the left and the other starting to the right. Both climbed higher into the centre of the far wall until they finally met in the middle and connected to a balcony that ran along both sides of the room.

The roof sloped from the front wall up to the far side of the room and continued on further into the house. It was lined with rich brown timber beams and, right in the centre, hung the most beautiful chandelier I had ever seen. The top was thick and round like a tree trunk and from the base came small roots, shooting in every direction. At the end of each root was a tiny little bulb that twinkled like stars in the afternoon sun.

‘Shall we go upstairs?’ I asked my brother.

He looked up at me with a toothy grin and shouted, ‘RACE YOU MEALY!’

I hesitated just for a moment, recalling a conversation I had had with Mum only last week.

‘But why does he call me Mealy, Mum? I don’t like it; it makes me think of yucky worms and dirt!’

She’d looked at me with what felt like pity and, behind her grin, just a hint of enjoyment.

‘Oh Amelia, it’s normal. He is young and still finding his way with words, you have a very elegant name and words like that can be hard for young children. It’s like when you were his age and you couldn’t say Spaghetti. Do you remember what you called it?’

Feeling embarrassed, I lowered my head, so my chin was on my chest.

‘Busgetti,’ I mumbled.

‘You see, he is learning and one day he will call you Amelia, but until that time, you have to be patient, my dear.’

Her words faded as quickly as they had arrived in my mind. I focused back on where I was and saw William was already a few steps ahead of me, almost at the base of the left staircase. I shook off my annoyance at his mispronunciation of my name and took off for the right staircase. We arrived at the bottom of the staircases at almost the same time, I could hear William thumping his way up the steps and I waited for just a moment to allow him a small head start. Dad always said that there was often more enjoyment in sharing victories with others than winning by yourself.

I grabbed the railing and slowly climbed the steps, taking two for each one that William took, hoping we would arrive at the top at the same time.

Sure enough, once my eyes were level with the top step, I could see the top of William’s head. I waited for him to take one more step and then started climbing the last few steps at a normal pace. Our feet met the cool of the hardwood floor at precisely the same moment and we shared a smile, knowing our race had ended in a draw.

We turned to face where we had just journeyed from; the great

doors hung open and I could see the green grass from the front yard and feel the warmth of the afternoon sun that bounced off the stone floor below, which was still a dazzling spectacle of colour.

I surveyed the second floor now that I had a better angle. My eyes followed the balcony that stretched out along the left and right sides of the room. There was one door in the same spot on each side of the room, with another door further down the wall on the left side.

I could see that there was only one other door on this floor, and it stood at the top of the stairs, just behind where William and I were standing.

‘You check right; I’ll check left.’ I shouted to William as I leapt along the balcony to the door on the left side.

I reached the door and rested my hand on the brass handle in a few short seconds and turned it. It clicked and I nudged the door open, bouncing into a cosy little room with a large window on the far side.

Below the window was a window seat so that you could sit or lie down and enjoy the view and the sunshine. This room would make a wonderful crafts room and I was looking forward to drawing the landscape beyond the glass panes.

Approaching the window, I noticed the old cushion that stretched from one end of the window seat to the other. A cloud of dust shot out of the cushion as I sat down on it, the particles dancing in the sunlight as they glided towards the floor.

Mum will need to make some new cushions, I thought.

From here, I could see over the hedge, which didn’t seem quite so large from this angle. Mum and Dad were unloading the car with as much care and skill as when they had loaded it at our old house and I thought for a moment I should probably give them a hand. The thought of choosing my room before William took the best one quickly hushed any such offer though.

I was starting to notice my eyelids getting quite heavy, when I heard a small squeal from William, who I guessed was still in the room across the hall. I dragged myself from the warmth of the room

I was in and back onto the balcony of the entrance hall.

‘Mealy, Mealy, come quick... ewwww!’

I ran along the balcony to the other side of the hall and pushed open the door of the room William was in. The room was a mirror image of the one I had just left. However, it was much colder and darker, as the sun’s embrace didn’t reach as far into this corner of the house.

William sat in the far corner on the right, hunched over something small and dark.

‘What is it, Will?’ I asked as I started slowly towards him.

‘I think it’s dead.’

I leaned over Will’s shoulder and saw the cold, petrified remains of a large black rat. It lay, one arm stretched out towards a small hole in the corner of the wall, barely big enough for it to fit through, just centimetres from where we hunched over its little body.

‘Don’t touch that, Will,’ I said, pulling him back by the shoulder. ‘Dad will get rid of it when he’s finished downstairs.’ I tried to sound brave but could hear my voice trembling.

Rats had always been a fear of mine, renowned for being dirty, smelly creatures with large gnashing teeth. I shuddered as we walked back towards the door.

‘Come, let’s go look at the last room together!’ I grabbed his hand and pulled him through the door I had just come through and was relieved to feel the warmth again as we stepped into the main hall, the door behind us clicking shut.

‘Is everything alright?’ I heard Mum call from below.

We both approached the balcony. I leaned over it and Will pressed his face against the wooden railing to try and see below.

‘Will found a dead rat Mum; I told him not to touch it.’ She was standing next to a pile of bags and I could see the exhaustion on her face as I spoke.

‘It stinks!’ Will shouted.

‘Well now, leave it be and your father will be up to get rid of it

soon. If you need me, I will be in the kitchen starting dinner, my loves.’ She picked up the bag of groceries that she had put aside for our dinner and walked down the left hallway, presumably towards the kitchen, directly below where we were standing.

‘Alright, Will, let’s go before Mum and Dad get the chance to beat us into the last room.’ I grabbed his hand and led him down the balcony, back towards the landing at the top of the stairs.

We stopped right outside the last door. The handle looked different to all the others we had seen so far. It wasn’t plain and brass like the others; this one was more intricate. Smooth and round, it came to a point and looked to be made from wood.

‘Nut,’ said William

‘What do you mean, nut?’ I asked

‘Nut,’ he said again, pointing to the door handle.

I leaned in closer and examined the handle from the side. ‘You’re right.’ I said, ‘It looks just like an acorn! How very strange.’

Stepping close, the floorboards creaked quietly under my foot. I placed my hand on the acorn-shaped handle and turned it. The door yawned open to reveal what was hidden behind. Will said what I was thinking.

‘Wow!’