

Royal Visit

by Vivian Zenari

Two years after she moved away, Merryn returned to Slave Lake during the interlude between the fire and the flood. The fire had started in the surrounding forest and moved into the townsite. Flames razed part of downtown and most of a new subdivision of split-levels on the service road that ran along the Slave River estuary, past Wally's Walleye Fishing Campground, and out to the provincial park. Merryn's friend Darla owned the fishing camp. The camp lost one shed and one motor boat in the fire. Merryn drove up from Edmonton to comfort her.

Three days after Merryn went back home to Edmonton, the Slave Lake estuary flooded. Water took out the service road, submerged the fishing camp, and filled Darla's basement. Merryn telephoned Darla to give comfort. Darla said that the insurance company was the only one who could give her the comfort she needed.

A few weeks after the flood, royal newlyweds William and Kate, on their matrimonial tour of Canada, stopped in Slave Lake out of some kind of ancestral guilt or in homage to William's do-gooder mother or through actual sympathy for the town. Merryn watched the news reports of the visit on TV in Edmonton. The royals walked through a burned-out section of town where the floodwaters lapped against the platoon of bulldozers that had been brought in to remove the fire debris. The royals charmed everyone. Merryn was immune to that kind of thing now, but one of her earliest memories was of getting up at some godforsaken hour to watch on TV the wedding of William's parents. In particular, she remembered an overhead shot of the long train of Diana's dress. The train was so long, and Diana moved so slowly, that the bride seemed to be paving a wide, glossy white path in her wake. The child Merryn imagined walking behind Diana in bare feet, and knowing that the path would be made of snow. Yes, Merryn understood the disruptive allure of celebrity.

A year after William and Kate's royal visit, Merryn found herself driving to Slave Lake for a benefit concert to raise money for the two Slave Lake disasters. It was her second trip to Slave Lake since her ex-husband Paul died and she moved from Slave Lake to Edmonton. Once again she was driving north on the highway that wound through towering pine and spruce. From time to time the wall of green pulled away from the road and revealed the tall black skeletons of lodgepole pines and black spruce burned in a forest fire, either the famous disastrous one or any of the others that had swept through, earlier or later, with less fanfare. Behind these charred stands of trees often rose the reddish stalks of trees killed or dying from an infestation of pine beetles, whose phalanxes were advancing west to east across Canada thanks to the heat of climate change. Sometimes the reddish stalks outnumbered the black ones and the green ones. The effect was colourful but eerie.

Merryn wondered what the town looked like now. Paul used to call Slave Lake the armpit of Alberta. With the leveling fire and washout water, Paul might have called it a shaved armpit.

Alfred the cellist, who was sitting in the passenger seat next to Merryn, said, "What"?

She wasn't sure what she had said out loud or what Alfred had heard. She lived alone, and she had gotten into the habit of speaking to herself. Merryn decided to direct the conversation away from whatever she had been thinking. "I think I was the only violinist in Slave Lake when I lived here."

The claim was ridiculous, and she hoped its foolishness would stifle Alfred's underdeveloped desire to talk. Her plan worked: he didn't say anything. Alfred wasn't much of a talker, one reason Merryn had recommended him to the symphony administrators as the person to take with her for the benefit concert. Alfred was a pretty good cellist, of course, and he seemed eager to go, too. He was a second cellist, new to the city, and likely needed a few brownie points. She had interacted with him briefly at two or three events, once with his wife. He was of average height, with a small build, pale hair, and pale eyes. The banal words "neat," "pleasant," and "polite" best described him. Nevertheless, she had often found herself thinking about him, for some reason, and when the press release about the concert arrived on her desk, his was the first name that entered her head.

Merryn had volunteered for the benefit reluctantly. As a PR person for the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and a former resident of Slave Lake, she was the obvious choice. The symphony board likely felt sorry for her. Merryn had given up her second violin position to move to Slave Lake with Paul. When she returned to Edmonton three years later, her spot in the orchestra had been filled. Perhaps management thought this trip would make up for everything. Merryn didn't particularly feel sorry for herself. She did, however, think it was bad form to turn down the concert. She wanted to get her old position back one day. She thought she should demonstrate an overall amicability. That is, she needed a few brownie points too.

Soon the green trees stepped back from the highway, and the road signs announced a drop in the speed limit. They had reached the town's edge. She didn't need to go right in town, though, not yet. Instead, she turned right off the main highway and onto the service road. The flood waters had receded a long time ago, and the subdivision was reconstituting itself. The building-block bodies of new split-levels were rising from the fire-darkened, grassless field. The subdivision had not existed when Merryn lived with Paul in Slave Lake, and the houses had been burned to nothing when she had driven up to see Darla after the fire.

She and Darla had met because of Paul, or more to the point, because of Paul's family. Paul's extended family often came to Slave Lake out of nostalgia. Paul's family originated in Slave Lake, but most had moved to the larger cities in Alberta--Edmonton, the government and university city, and Calgary, the oil and gas metropolis. A handful of first cousins and one aunt and uncle still lived in Slave Lake; he and Merryn became the B-listers for hosting returnees. While Merryn lived in Slave Lake, one of Paul's paternal aunts had a sixtieth birthday, and a first cousin had a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The maternal side of his family had a full-fledged reunion too. Wally's Walleye Fishing Camp was the place that Paul's uncles, aunts, and cousins would stay, since Paul's people tended to motorhomes and fifth-wheels. Paul and Merryn would organize fishing trips to give people something to do other than watch TV in their basement. Even though Paul had labelled Slave Lake an armpit, he took pride in being a second-string family patriarch at the age of twenty-nine. Merryn had no illusions about the fantasy behind that conceit. The family thought Paul was a throwback, someone who couldn't get

himself established in the big city. He had tried to be a teacher in Edmonton but he gave up when he discovered he didn't really understand children. Like many people in Alberta at loose ends, he had turned to the oilpatch in northern Alberta.

Forced there with him, forced by love, Merryn had decided not to teach violin--she didn't understand children either. Instead she took up cording and beading, things she'd always wanted to try but hadn't because she took her music career too seriously. She sold her crafts at the Saturday farmer's market in the parking lot of the Slave Lake tourist centre off the main highway. That was where she found Gillian and Robert's delicious mustard pickles and where she made some friends, including Darla, co-owner of Wally's, who would go to the farmer's market for the same pickles.

The farmer's market had turned their business relationship into friendship. Darla became very necessary to Merryn after she split up with Paul. Merryn stayed at Darla's place while she and Paul sorted out their living arrangements after their separation. Now, a couple of years later, Darla had agreed to chauffeur Merryn and Alfred in her new SUV to the community centre for the benefit concert.

As Merryn drove Alfred and their instruments up the side road to the camp, she didn't see evidence of damage. The layout was the same: a lightly treed campground with broad lots and gravel pads for RVs. Even on this weekday, three big motorhomes were nesting in the fishing camp. In the fish-cleaning station at the estuary's edge, Merryn could see two men in baseball caps moving their arms in the rapid swishes of men tearing the guts out of fish bodies, the walleye or pike caught during an early morning expedition on the lake. Slave Lake was not immediately visible from the campground, but the estuary was: a wide, slow river that bordered the north side of the camp and disappeared under a bridge and around a bend to the lake that named the town.

Merryn stopped the car in front of the white bi-level at the entrance to the fishing camp, next to a newer-looking shed. Merryn and Alfred got out of Merryn's car as Darla opened her house's front door and waved them inside. "Keep your shoes on," Darla yelled. "The dogs just tramped through with muddy paws."

Once they were through the front door, Darla steered them into the big country-style kitchen and sat them down at the round wooden table in the corner. The dogs, two chocolate Labs, were lying half-asleep on a mat in front of the kitchen sink, surrounded by faint muddy paw-prints. On the wall above the kitchen counter Merryn spotted the birthday present she had recently shipped to Darla's husband Dan. It was a heart-shaped plaque that read "I LOVE MY WIFE (when she lets me go fishing)." Darla herself was dressed in plum-coloured slacks and blouse and a black blazer, with plum-coloured lipstick to match. It was what Darla called "three steps up" from her normal camp wear.

Darla gave Merryn a generous hug. "It's so good to see you up here, Merryn," Darla said. "And I am proud to say that Slave Lake is currently disaster-free."

"Not counting me being here, that is," Merryn said.

Darla shook her head. “Oh, no, you don’t. That’s not the right state of mind for a charity concert.”

Darla was not a sunshine and peaches kind of person, but she knew, more or less, what was proper and what wasn’t, and Merryn clearly was displaying an inappropriate cynicism. “Okay,” Merryn said. “I get it. I’m happy to be here. I really am.”

Darla telegraphed her relief with a smile and a shoulder squeeze.

Merryn introduced Darla and Alfred to each other. Darla was jovial with Alfred, rather than slyly flirtatious. Darla had already quizzed Merryn that morning about her cellist companion via text message. Merryn had cleared Darla up about a few things--Alfred was married to a dental hygienist named Helen with whom he shared a golden retriever named Buddy. Alfred was polite to Darla in his usual charmless way.

Darla slipped out of the house to deliver commands to her oldest son, Dan Jr., who would be taking over the front office duties. Darla’s husband Big Danny was up-country, off doing his thing as a commercial light fixture installer. With a bellow from outside, Darla ordered Merryn and Alfred into Darla’s dusty SUV behind the house. She drove them back down the camp access road, up the service road and to the right-hand short-cut road through the suburb to the community centre.

The parking lot and streets around the centre were uncrowded. As she walked in the bright summer airiness of boreal Alberta from parking lot to entrance, Merryn reminded herself that they were half-an-hour early. Inside the center’s shiny lobby, several suited men and dressed women were milling. The lobby smelled of Pine-Sol and dirt, which is how she remembered all public buildings in Slave Lake as smelling.

Merryn immediately found herself standing in front of Slave Lake’s newspaper editor, Tisha Fine. Tisha had a new place in town folklore for not being in Slave Lake during either the fire or the flood. Merryn knew Tisha personally. A couple of years earlier, Tisha had been tenacious in her coverage of Paul’s death. He had died on the so-called Highway of Death that connected Fort McMurray to the rest of Alberta. The crash had been spectacular. Without Tisha’s investigative skills, no one would have known that Merryn and Paul had split up three months before the car accident. Prior to the paper’s coverage of Paul’s death, Merryn had simply been the arty person who moved to Slave Lake with prodigal son Paul, a faint sign of Slave Lake’s cultural uplift. Fresh out of journalism school, Tisha had personally staked out Merryn’s house after Paul’s accident and had called Merryn on the phone many times.

“Merryn!” Tisha exclaimed. “I heard you were coming to the concert. It’s great to see your support during this difficult time.”

“My pleasure,” Merryn answered. She thought, just like you gave *me* support doing *my* difficult time? But Merryn knew that Tisha’s loyalty to Slave Lake was as deep as Merryn’s. “It’s the right thing to do,” Merryn added.

“It sure is,” Alfred said.

Merryn frowned. She wasn't expecting Alfred to speak at all, but there he was, speaking. Alfred's eyes wrinkled up with an empty smile. Tisha nodded, genuinely pleased in a professional sense, as though she hadn't notice the stiffness behind Alfred's rare words.

After a few minutes of chitchat about the farmer's market and the resurrecting suburb, the four of them entered the auditorium together. Like schoolchildren on talent show day, all the performers sat in the front rows of the auditorium until they were called up. Tisha had to sit in the row behind them.

The auditorium wasn't that full. Patches of the light-blue cushioned seats showed through the muted colours of the dignitaries and locals who donated through buying a ticket. The first part of the benefit consisted of speeches. Merryn didn't recognize many of the names, though she had met the master of ceremonies before, a man who was once mayor but now was a town councillor. As the master of ceremonies listed the people who had been helpful during last summer's crises, Merryn kept thinking about a person whom the ex-mayor didn't mention: the radio announcer that townspeople had blamed for not announcing the seriousness of the fire quickly enough. He had been basically been run out of town. What was his name? He had a not-very-interesting announcer's voice but had an impressive head of dark curly hair to which he had added blond highlights. As the Slave Lake scapegoat, his appearance would have added a certain poignancy to the title, an air of St. Sebastian, tied up to a tree, eyes rolled heavenward, as the arrows rained down on his bare flesh.

After the speeches, she and Alfred climbed up the steps to the stage. They played the Handel-Halvorsen Passacaglia. She liked the piece, despite its difficulty and familiarity. The cello gamely kept up with the violin in its piece's overall briskness but refused to match the violin's chippiness in the fast sections and schmaltz in the slow sections. The cello held the violin back just enough so that it didn't fly out of control in vertiginous insanity or crawl to a complete halt in maudlin self-immolation. In the closing section, the cello stopped fighting and joined the violin in the extremity of its frantic melancholy, even exceeding it because of its darker timbre and the musician's need to sweep his bow in wider arcs. As a musician, Alfred spun out a humane sympathy that Alfred the person declined to display. Merryn's fingers tingled with the pain and beauty of it all.

When the final chord together faded, the audience applauded loudly but curtly. Merryn said something about being glad to be back in Slave Lake to help support her second home. More applause, and she and Alfred walked to their seats. The spell was over.

They had to sit through the last two performers, a pretty good school choir and a country singer with a backup trio of musicians, all from Slave Lake. The current mayor gave a short speech about the importance of community and said something about being “Slave Lake Strong.”

The final applause began and ended. Merryn was relieved she could get up from her hard chair. The event wasn't over yet, though. The auditorium emptied into the lobby. Everyone who thought they were somebody or who just wanted a coffee or a juice and a cookie or cheese and

crackers remained to munch and mingle around the catering tables. Merryn found this environment familiar from her PR work. All Merryn had to do was smile, try to remember a name or two, say she was glad to be back in town and how fantastic it was that people were rallying to rebuild the community. Alfred stood, more or less mutely, beside her, though he did answer one question from someone about the inconvenience of travel with a cello. (He said it was better than having a bass.) Darla positioned herself nearby but not immediately nearby, like undercover security, making small talk with anyone who tried to approach Merryn and Alfred before letting them go on towards them.

Inevitably, Tisha was one of these people. “Of course, the turn-out here wasn’t spectacular,” Tisha said. “The big event was last year when Mötley Crüe or something came up. People thought Gene Simmons from KISS was coming but he never did. There’s another concert out at the field-house tonight. I think a country band is coming for that: Emerson Drive?” Tisha didn’t say much more before she excused herself and swerved toward the country singer, who was laughing loudly among a small circle of people. Merryn and Paul, after all, were yesterday’s news.

After fifteen more minutes, Merryn gave Darla a nod. Darla rounded up Merryn and Alfred and took them to shake hands with the mayor. They quietly went out of the community centre to the parked SUV in the lot. As they drove back to Wally’s Walleye Camp, Darla gossiped about the local business owner who was suing the town over the fire damage to his store: Darla thought he might actually win.

Once they got back to the camp, Darla asked if Merryn and Alfred wanted to stay for supper. No, Merryn needed to get Alfred back home to his wife and pet. It hurt not to stay around, but Merryn had her own agenda for the day and she had to stay with the plan. Darla insisted, but Merryn negotiated herself and Alfred into Merryn’s car with a promise to call Darla late that night.

As she drove out of the camp, Merryn wondered if she should go see Paul’s grave. She gave the steering wheel a jerk in the direction of the cemetery, but she stopped herself. No way. She had promised herself. Having Alfred with her made avoiding the cemetery necessary. Wasn’t that why she had taken Alfred here?

When they pulled out into the access road, Merryn asked Alfred if he wanted to see the nature interpretive centre. “It’s my favourite place in Slave Lake.”

“In that case,” Alfred said, “of course.”

After a five-minute drive down the main highway, they rolled into the parking lot of the Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation, a group of three or four grey-green buildings in a clearing of the forest. One other car was parked in the lot. Merryn and Alfred walked along the cement path from the parking lot to the main building as sparrows chirped unseen from the trees.

“Is Wally’s Walleye Camp named after the fish walleye?”

At the sound of his voice, Merryn almost did a double-take. Walleye was a new word for Alfred. On the drive up, she had to tell him what walleye was: a spiny-finned, orange and black fish with strange eyes.

“No,” Merryn said. “Darla’s father’s name is Wally.”

Alfred blinked rapidly. “Is that a joke?”

“No,” Merryn said. “It surely is not.”

Alfred chuckled. Merryn wasn’t sure she’d ever heard Alfred laugh. It was a thinly pitched smear of a giggle. He did that all the way to the entrance of the main building. He was, it seemed, genuinely tickled by the camp’s name.

When they entered the building’s broad, high lobby, Merryn could smell the newness of the building, even though it had been around a few years now. A cheerful young female attendant popped out from an office and said that if they needed any help or had questions they could ask her. Once she disappeared, Merryn and Alfred had the place to themselves. The displays were pristine--the flap doors, dials, pushbuttons and touch-screens all worked. They knew this because they walked through every display in the three rooms that comprised the interpretive centre and played with everything they could play with.

Alfred was especially taken with the glass display of a dozen different bird eggs. “Aren’t they amazing?” he asked. “That one is the size of a marble!”

Merryn liked listening to the bird calls on the bird-call panel. When you pushed one of the white buttons, the button illuminated, and a spotlight shone on the appropriate taxidermed bird above the panel. Merryn pushed each button and savoured each seven-second track. She liked best the calls she knew best: the robin, the white-throated sparrow, the crow. The crow in particular reminded her of the graveyard where Paul was buried. His grave marker was simple: a bronzed plaque with a metal tubular vase. When she was up here the last time, it had been early morning, when the crows liked to call. One crow had been on a high branch of the tree next to the grave. Someone had put a silk white carnation in the vase. Merryn hit the crow button on the panel three times. Caw caw caw. Caw caw caw.

The main room of the interpretive centre had a large set of automatic doors that opened, surprisingly, into a wraparound balcony. That side of the building was set on the downward slope of a hill, so the balcony hung over a small meadow two stories below them. The meadow flowed away from the building and up another hill until it was abruptly halted by a wall of white spruce and aspen. The fire had not touched this part of forest. Swallows swooped across the field from the wedge-shaped overhangs of the roof. The swallows’ whistles swooped with them.

“The mosquitoes get big around here,” Alfred said from beside Merryn. So he had a sense of humour. Quiet people were often like that. How else could someone marry someone so quiet unless he revealed something secret or magical that could lead to attraction?

They re-entered the building and walked through it back to the lobby. Alfred glanced into the small gift shop. He said, "I should go and get a souvenir for my wife."

They both entered the gift shop. While she waited for Alfred to choose something, Merryn loitered near the cash counter and judged the quality of the different trinkets on the counter-- sturdy maple-leaf keychains, dubious Slave Lake keychains, strange upside-down floating bear pens, junky plastic flower rings meant for little girls. Alfred tapped a desk bell on the cashier counter, first softly, then loudly, until the woman who worked in the centre flowed in. She sold him a small stuffed toy, a robin that emitted a realistic robin chirp when squeezed. "For my wife and/or my dog," he explained.

Alfred had mentioned the dog briefly in the conversation they had had on the phone before they had driven up together. She had not gleaned much from that interview. She came to some conclusions about him, though. This trip had been a single-minded mission.

Not true, Merryn, not true. She had a mission, but she had an anti-mission too: not to go to the cemetery, not to think about how things had gone after she forced her husband to come out to her, not to think of the accident, not to blame herself.

With a gift in hand, Alfred didn't need to be in Slave Lake anymore. Merryn didn't need to be there anymore either. She didn't need to have any more missions here.

In silence they left the building, walked in the thin late afternoon air and through the bright shadows, back to the parking lot, and in a few more minutes they were back on the highway in Merryn's hatchback, heading south.

Alfred asked Merryn if she thought things had gone well in Slave Lake.

"Yes," Merryn said. "What do you think?"

"It was great. I really liked it. I might come up here again and camp."

"What did your wife think when you said you were going away?"

"Oh, no problem. It's only one day. She's at work, anyway."

"So she didn't mind."

"No. She has her own life."

Merryn made sure she kept her eyes on the road as she drove and talked. "As long as her life is not too different from yours. If it's too different, then maybe you should think about not being married to her. Doing what you really want to do."

Alfred made a soft sound. She darted a look to his face, which was blank. She looked forward quickly again. Out here one never knew what could jump out at you suddenly, a bear or deer or moose, or a fast-moving car or a motorcycle, an unexpected curve in the road, a tunnel.

“Okay,” Alfred said, drawing out the last syllable. “Where did that come from.”

“Out of nowhere,” Merryn said.

It flashed up at her now: the accident, the newspaper, the coroner’s report, the public inquiry, the conspiracy theories you and others dream up to make sense of something you actually understand, knew for a long time, the silk flower at the grave. “Suddenly, and out of nowhere.”

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