REBECCA PĂPUCARU

BOOMING

Christmas, 1905

STANDING ON A BILLIARD TABLE in the small mining town of Copper Cliff, Ontario, reciting her poem, "The Song My Paddle Sings," Pauline Johnson wonders if a tour of London might not restore her reputation.

She considers her idol, Sarah Bernhardt, who crossed the Atlantic in the other direction and is currently touring North America. Tomorrow Bernhardt, now sixty-one years old, will be onstage in Montreal, still playing the ingénue to swooning audiences. Pauline raises her arm, feeling a pinch at the waist of her buckskin dress. She's going to fat while Bernhardt, seventeen years her senior, is reputed to have retained her slender figure.

This grimy saloon shames her; so, too, these restless miners slumped on the wooden benches. Her partner Dink will have their full attention when he minces and mugs his way through his vaudeville routine. The female pianists and opera singers Pauline meets in drafty, makeshift railway stations all have male partners, required protection from the miners and fishermen not yet accustomed to touring artists like herself. Pauline, child of a Mohawk father and a white mother, is considered lucky to have Dink, now stretched out on the billiard table, one hand pressed to his forehead in a lisping parody of Bernhardt. Dink has been in Canada since boyhood but sometimes slips back into cockney, particularly when a French accent is required. He's hopeless at Bernhardt. Not that it matters; a man parroting a woman, even poorly, always merits a laugh.

Pauline recalls the doves released during Bernhardt's performance in Montreal nine years ago. From Pauline's seat in the balcony, Bernhardt resembled a saint in an alcove. Pauline could name each of The Divine One's poses, as outlined in her copy of *The Handbook of Theatrical Poses*. The seated pose that telegraphed, how pleased I am to see you, or, I wish you had not called. The pose of curious listening: bend at the waist, head cocked.

Portrait of E. Pauline Johnson (c. 1900)

No need to understand French; even Bernhardt's slender white wrists transcended language. On the train back to Brantford, Pauline studied her own hands: not quite so white as Madame Bernhardt's, but just as expressive. She rolled up the sleeves of her dress to admire her arms, still firm from canoeing all summer but no less eloquent than those of Madame.

Pauline retreats to her boarding house with her bouquet of roses, a gift from the local constable. The petals have already wilted brown in the sulphuric air. In 1894, London was as filthy as Copper Cliff. Yet the drawing rooms of the lords and ladies were always full of flowers, untouched by smog. In her new brocade dinner dress from Barker's department store, accessorized with a wampum belt, Pauline recited "As Red Men Die," pausing mid-sentence to violently pluck a rose, scattering the petals on the Turkey carpet. In response, her hostess fainted, a delicate slumping in her armchair, her ankles still crossed. Lady Ripley was overcome by the fiery Indian maiden's recitation. For two months, London society could not get enough of the towering, black-haired, black-eyed Iroquois enchantress with the high cheekbones and olive complexion clad in her Indian outfit. Never mind that Pauline, petite, brown-haired, and grey-eyed, arrived at their soirees in evening dress and gloves. Her cheekbones and complexion did not disappoint, nor did the eagle feather tucked behind one ear. Only the arrival of a cowboy poet from California reciting in boots and spurs ended Pauline's reign of delicious terror. Pauline returned home with a London publisher for her first book and new ball gowns.

In her rented room, which has a basin but no mirror, Pauline removes her famous Indian costume, designed more for titillation than authenticity. Hot water is not included in the rent; Pauline has decided to offer the landlady, Mrs. Hinch, a copy of her book in exchange for a bath. She cannot present herself to Madame Bernhardt smelling of greasepaint and sweat.

Before her death, Pauline's mother had begged her to stop touring. Emily Howells Johnson had cried when Pauline had commissioned her photographic *cartes de visites*, one of which Pauline now slips inside her book. Her daughter's image available for purchase at newsagents and photographers' studios. Pasted inside scrapbooks beside postcards of chained grizzly bears or that shameless Bernhardt, illegitimate child of a Jewish courtesan and mother of a bastard son, feigning eternal sleep in her infamous coffin. Pauline explained to her tearful mother the importance of "booming," of promoting one's name to the public.

"Like Pears Soap or Carter's Liver Bitters," said her older sister Evelyn. Evelyn, unmarried, is now the matron of a girls' hostel.

Pauline puts on her dressing gown, retrieves the book from her carpet bag, and opens the door.

Mrs. Hinch is in her sitting room, dressed in brown satin, the piece of velvet she is forever embroidering in her lap.

"Such lovely work," says Pauline, although the scrap looks unchanged. As does Mrs. Hinch. Mrs. Pinched, Dink calls her.

Mrs. Hinch looks down at the velvet, as if seeing it for the first time.

"Mrs. Hinch, I hope it's no trouble, but I have been unwell, and a hot bath would be much appreciated."

No doubt used to barter, Mrs. Hinch takes Pauline's book, *Canadian Born*. The postcard inside shows Pauline as a young woman in buckskin and feathers, one manicured hand caressing her famous bear claw necklace below the words "Tekahionwake, Mohawk poetess and recitalist."

Mrs. Hinch's small mouth tightens even more as she gazes at Pauline in her prime.

"A home needs only one volume," she says, returning the book to Pauline just as Dink bounds into the sitting room. Mrs. Hinch rises from her chair, the velvet sliding off her lap.

"Where to from here?" she asks Dink, her hollow cheeks brightening.

"A brief sojourn in Montreal before our tour of the Maritimes," Dink tells Mrs. Hinch, retrieving her velvet while executing his light-footed version of a Cape Breton jig.

Mrs. Hinch serves Dink Christmas pudding from her sideboard. As he eats standing up, Dink points to Pauline's book, which Pauline holds in both hands like a foundling.

"Do you know, Mrs. Hinch, that Bliss Carman, our Tennyson, keeps Miss Johnson's book in his library?"

Pauline blushes. Bliss has no doubt read Pauline's latest reviews. She relies too heavily on gesture, her delivery is forced, her earlier vivacity and daintiness have been replaced by music-hall slang and lowbrow antics. Worse, she shouts. In his last letter, Bliss urged her to abandon touring and devote herself to literature. He does not know that in a good year Pauline earns more than a schoolteacher, although not enough for transatlantic fare and new gowns. Bliss, a roving bachelor and journalist in New York City, concluded his letter by declining to purchase Pauline's collection of wam-

pum belts. In time, Pauline would be grateful that her father's effects had remained in her possession.

"I know a Bess Carman," says Mrs. Hinch, frowning.

Dink, laughing, grabs Mrs. Hinch by the waist and dances her round the room, past the blistering wallpaper and yellowed lace curtains. Pauline, raised in a mansion built by her father on Six Nations territory, could ring a bell in any room of Chiefswood to summon colourless, fleshless women like Mrs. Hinch from its kitchen. Pauline recalls the ladders in her father's library where, up until his sudden death, he performed his duties as government interpreter. Where would Mrs. Hinch keep Pauline's book, even if she'd taken it? With her collection of thimbles and pressed dried flowers?

Mrs. Hinch's wide, dancing buttocks are about to collide with her sideboard. Pauline retires to her room to plot tomorrow night's ambush of Madame Bernhardt.

In the gold-embossed lobby of Montreal's Windsor Hotel Dink spots the vaudevillian Rube Fax seated on a velvet ottoman, his top hat resting on one knee. On their way to Rube, Pauline and Dink wave to Signor Morello, the man of a thousand bird calls (a call for each day of the year!), slumped against one of the marble columns. Mr. Pratchett, manager of a troupe of wrestlers past their prime, is sprawled on the claret carpet, having just been knocked down by one of his charges. In church halls and saloons across the country Pauline has seen these men grapple with each other, sweaty and panting like half-drowned men fished out of a river. Mr. Pratchett, now on his feet, is handing out *cartes de visites* to interested parties, mostly women, drawn by the wrestlers in their short tunics.

"I hear The Divine One is about," Dink says to Rube as soon as they reach him.

Pauline briefed Dink on her scheme during their train journey. Naturally, he approved. Four years ago, Dink ambushed Pauline in her dressing room at the Russell Hotel in Ottawa, his second such sortie. Pauline, then tired of the late-night arrivals in one-street towns with no one to greet her, let alone find her lodging and a warm meal, finally capitulated. Dink was young and clever; he sang her music hall ditties in his shrill voice, lightening the long journeys along a railway completed, almost two decades ago, to move Canadian troops west to quash Riel and his rebels. Dink carried Pauline's steamer trunk when no porter could be found. He knew every ho-

tel manager in the country by first name. He'd even designed her wig after she lost all her hair.

Any doubts Pauline had about his slight talents were dispelled that winter in Orillia when Pauline suffered an attack of brain fever. Dink, wearing his winter coat with the beaver collar, slept on the floor of her room. Pauline awoke that Christmas Day to a weeping Dink, his negligible chin trembling, reassuring her that she was not to worry. He would exchange his gold pinky ring for a wig of Indian hair, and she would leave as beautiful as when she'd arrived. Besides losing her hair, the blisters caused by the infection had badly scarred her skin, but Dink had a sure hand with theatrical blending powder and rouge. "Gypsy" was her colour, he said. No one would ever know. And no one ever has. Pauline's hair has since grown back, a cap of dark curls that now needs washing and setting.

Rube tells Dink to proceed to the bar if he wants a glimpse of old Sarah Burnheart.

"Look for the old bat wearing the dead bat," says Rube, referring to Bernhardt's famous seal skin hat topped with a stuffed bat. Rube removes a rug from his carpet bag and stretches out on the ottoman for a few hours of sleep before his train west, where he will join the other Fax Brothers on a tour of mining towns along the branch line.

Dink's face is pink, his small eyes gleam. "Shall we, milady?" he asks Pauline, holding out an arm.

Pauline walks ahead of Dink. She must reach Bernhardt first. She scans the bar until she finds Bernhardt's table at the back. Madame Bernhardt has her back to the velvet-papered wall, gloved hands gesturing to the couple seated beside her, a man and a young girl.

The scene blurs before Pauline, the blood pounds in her ears. Her tongue feels heavy, her lips dry. This is the worst stage fright she has ever known.

Gently, Dink pushes Pauline forward until she is standing before Bernhardt, one hand on her hip, the other at her throat.

Dink bows, but not Pauline. She stands with chin high, head tilted to display the eagle feather pinned behind one ear. How she longs to gaze at Madame and her fine, expressive mouth, her cornflower blue eyes, and her famous nose caricatured by anti-Semites on two continents. Is she as ageless as the reporters say? But gaping at her idol will spoil her careful tableau.

Madame breaks the silence, stage-whispering to her small entourage. Hearing the famous, musical voice, Pauline quivers.

The man in the tuxedo introduces himself in American English as Madame's tour manager, a Mr. Henry Abbott of New York. Dink shakes Mr. Abbott's hand, which is gloved in impeccable white leather. He introduces himself as Pauline's manager.

"Please tell Madame Bernhardt that Miss Pauline Johnson is a recitalist of her own poetry," Dink says. "She has been sent by the Governor-General to recite for her."

Abbott and Madame confer. Pauline stares at Dink's ungloved hands. At least his nails are clean.

At last Madame nods at Pauline, and Abbott resumes his seat. As she recites "Cry of an Indian Wife," Pauline avoids Bernhardt's gaze, reducing her famous features to a blur of white pancake and black kohl under strands of famously hennaed hair. Pauline ends her recitation, as always, by standing silent for several long seconds with arms outstretched. Madame's eloquent hands are clasped under her chin, and she drops her blue-tinged eyelids. This pose does not appear in Pauline's handbook. Madame has engineered this posture to convey admiration for a fellow artist while drawing attention to herself in the act of admiring.

Hands still clasped, Madame whispers to Abbott, who translates for Pauline.

"Madame wishes to examine your necklace," he says.

Pauline, prepared to give Madame the copy of her book that Mrs. Hinch rejected, struggles to unclasp her necklace. Dink steps behind her and removes it, gravely handing it to Abbott who, with equal gravity, gives it to Madame.

Pauline stage-whispers her request to Dink, who conveys it to Abbott: "Please tell Madame that Miss Johnson wishes to examine her hat."

Madame's gaze moves from Dink to Pauline. At last, she removes her hat, giving it to Abbott, who gives it to Dink, who gives it to Pauline. Dink, who often laughs at his own jokes onstage, does not smile or even wink during this ritual.

The bat's mouth is frozen in a grimace that reveals its fangs, and its wings are permanently outstretched. Pauline winces, returning it to Dink. Madame, however, is delighted by Pauline's necklace, as she strokes one blackened claw with a gloved finger. She holds the necklace up to her throat, burying the sharp points in lace and velvet. Once again, Abbott translates her request.

"Madame wishes to trade."

Pauline steadies her breath. Ignoring Dink's stage cough, she tells Madame she is honoured.

The trade completed, Pauline and Dink are invited to join Madame. Dink places the bat hat on the table, like a general's helmet. The young girl at Bernhardt's side leaves the room, hurrying towards the lobby. Pauline is aware of her own pungent odour, a rubbery musk of theatrical cold cream and sweat inefficiently masked by toilet water. She hasn't had a bath in days. She puts aside her shame and begins to outline her plan to Abbott, who translates for Madame.

Dink's fingers drum the tabletop as Pauline proposes restaging Madame's publicity stunt of twenty-five years past, when Bernhardt leapt from ice floe to ice floe on the frozen St. Lawrence River. This time, however, after Madame has ventured onto the ice, Pauline will follow and lose her footing, whereupon Madame will rescue the Iroquois poetess.

Rarely does a day pass without Bernhardt appearing in the papers. Just this morning *The Montreal Star* reported on the menagerie travelling with Madame on her tour, which includes a tiger cub and a chimpanzee. This stunt, like all of Madame's antics, will be international news, bringing Pauline to the attention of London impresarios.

As Pauline concludes her proposal, Madame's girl returns with a new hat, identical to the first, which Madame sets atop her copper head.

"Twins!" says Dink, clapping his hands.

Pauline pretends not to hear this, just as she pretends to have forgotten her necklace, a gift from a white admirer, now tangled inside Madame's silk purse. Madame adjusts her hat, dispersing the lilac smell of her perfumed powder. She cocks her head to one side. The pose of curious listening?

No, this is the pose of incredulity. Or perhaps Pauline's stench has at last reached Madame.

"I have read of Madame's troubles with the Archbishop of Montreal," says Dink. "A disgrace that our newspapers print his name in the same breath as Madame's."

Madame drops her pose, her eyes glinting much like those of Mrs. Hinch watching Dink tuck into her Christmas pudding. Pauline, grateful for Dink's habit of reading the local paper in search of his own name, smiles at him.

"The man has dared to publish a review," says Abbott, mouth pinching below his neat mustache.

"He only reveals his ignorance of our art," says Dink. "What does he call Madame? The headmistress of a school of sin?"

Pauline is so relieved that Dink has revived Madame's interest in her scheme that she does not notice that Abbott is no longer translating.

"Her incomparable artistry does not render her scenes of lustful adultery any less immoral," says Dink, quoting the Archbishop's condemnation of Bernhardt, translated for the country's English papers. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to knock his name out of the papers?" Dink asks Abbott.

The three turn to Bernhardt, who is gazing up at the domed ceiling. Pauline follows her gaze to the chandelier above, then back down to Madame, who briefly covers her eyes with a hand before speaking.

"Let us pray," she says in accented English. "For the success of our venture," she tells Pauline, as she bows her head.

Pauline bows her head, too, as she often has before dinners in the homes of small-town matrons eager to see such a curiosity in person. As she does so, the eagle feather behind her ear brushes against the open, unseeing eye of the bat atop the Divine One's head.

No more freezing railway carriages. No more costume changes behind Dink's coat. No more sharing the bill with contortionists and pugilists.

Madame weeps prettily over their clasped hands. Pauline, too, releases a single tear from one eye. Does Madame see? Perhaps another tear, released from the other eye, would impress Madame—

The table is moving. Pauline raises her head. Dink has pushed his chair from the table, but not Madame. Even Abbott sits calmly as the table wobbles. Pauline rises from her chair just as Madame's *coupe de champagne* crashes to the floor. A dragon is crawling out from under the table, dragging its incrusted tail along the plush carpet. Pauline screams, grabs her recently acquired bat hat, and hurls it at the monster.

Madame laughs as Ali Baba, her famous pet alligator, yawns, revealing yellowed teeth like splintered pebbles.

"Harmless," Abbott assures Pauline. "Tame as a tabby." He returns the bat hat to Pauline, smiling.

Bernhardt rises from the table and picks up the animal's leash. To hoots and applause, she conducts the beast towards the canopied Ladies' Entrance on Dorchester Street. Abbott, Dink, and a still-shaking Pauline hurry after.

At the shore, a crowd cheers as Bernhardt emerges from her carriage,

followed by reporters. Lifting her petticoat and skirts, she steps onto an ice floe. Pauline walks onto the ice soon after in her Indian costume. She sees that Madame is not alone. She has brought Ali Baba with her. By torchlight Pauline makes out her bear claw necklace encircling the monster's thick neck.

Madame waves to the cheering crowd. Pauline turns her back on Madame's tableau.

In her poems, Pauline has resisted the cliché of the sure-footed Indian princess. And yet here she is, bounding over a frozen river in near-darkness. She does not hear the crowd singing *La Marseillaise*. She does not hear at all. A freezing wind blows the stink of greasepaint and sweat off her dress and skin.

The crowd's attention shifts to Pauline. Watching her sprint away like a hound after a hare, Madame recalls their shared carriage ride from the hotel. The Indian woman had wept and ranted about her dreadful life. Her manager, a fey man with a bony face and crooked smile, held Mademoiselle's hand as she unburdened herself. Abbott translated as best he could, but Bernhardt understood the woman perfectly.

Mademoiselle Johnson claimed to be forty-four years of age and homeless. Tomorrow she was to board yet another train, this time for Newfoundland. Mademoiselle's hopes for this visit were not great; on a previous tour of that desolate region, she had performed before an audience of three. Goats, she later learned, had eaten the playbills announcing her performance from off the noticeboards. Yet she was accustomed to such humiliations. At her most recent stop, she had agreed to donate her ticket sales towards the purchase of the town constable's new wooden leg.

Mademoiselle was forever writing letters to peers and politicians, begging money and letters of introduction. "My dear Sir So-and-So, I am taking this liberty of recalling myself to you . . . you will perhaps remember the Indian girl who recites her own poems . . . I would beg that you accord me a brief interview if the stress of your many duties permits . . ."

Madame, who owed her career to her mother's patron securing her place in both the Conservatoire and the Comédie-Française, and her enduring fame to her off-stage antics, did not need "booming" explained to her. Through Abbott, she commiserated with Mademoiselle. The hardships of touring, the fatigue of performance, the demands of one's public on top of one's craft: these she knew too. It was a shame that this frozen, priest-rid-

den country had no room for artists. If only Mademoiselle had been born in France or even England, she might have had an Ellen Terry or the great Rachel as exemplars.

Madame was certain the woman would find comfort in these words, circumstances of birth, unlike eloquence of gesture, being beyond one's control. Mademoiselle Johnson did stop crying, but she did not smile nor thank Madame for her insight. Instead, she looked at Ali Baba wrapped in his rug on Madame's lap, then up at Madame herself with such barbarity that Abbott ordered the carriage stopped. Luckily, they had arrived at the river. Madame stepped onto the ice, Ali Baba at her feet and a watchful Abbott by her side, lest the Indian woman attempt to push her into the river for speaking the truth that it was a curse and a burden to be born in such a cold-blooded country.

Madame gazes out at the frozen distance towards Île-des-Sœurs, that small island populated entirely by nuns, who farm the land unaided by men. Madame imagines them asleep beside their livestock, warming themselves with the beasts' farts and who knows what else. A strange, cold, pious country. She would offer Mademoiselle the fare to Europe, if not for her certainty that the poor woman would not survive long outside her native environment, however inhospitable it may be. Much like Ali Baba's predecessor, who died during his first Parisian winter.

Madame's right knee aches from the cold, damp air. Abbott helps her up into the carriage, where she settles Ali Baba on the cushion previously occupied by Mademoiselle Johnson. As the carriage pulls away Bernhardt wonders what will become of such a creature. She already knows what will become of Ali Baba, who has somehow ripped the bear claw necklace from his throat and is presently devouring it. Bernhardt resolves to shoot the beast herself, sending staged photographs of the event to the newspapers.

Returning to the shore unaided, Pauline envisions herself wearing Madame's bat hat while reciting a poem about a Mohawk girl luring the great Bernhardt onto the frozen St. Lawrence River. The miners, some at age fourteen already veterans of the pit, will laugh and cheer as Dink, unlikeliest of heroes, pantomimes his rescue of both women. In the light and warmth of the saloon, the dark pit will be forgotten. A shadow, nothing more.