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*Age 19*

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### **The Enchanted Owl**

The artist's hands are nimble. Her dark eyes are focused and caring. As her fingers guide the smoky lead of the pencil, her mind is streaming the flood of ideas and images that fill her head. As the swirls and shades on the paper begin to engulf the white emptiness of the canvas, a lifetime of memories that influenced her now shapes the birth of an owl. The first lines are timid, marking where the sketch will begin, and where the sketch will end. She sweeps the lead delicately, with the precision of a trained hand. She hums a few notes, in no particular order, just as they come to her. The sketch is similar to her tune, emerging from the pencil as the image appears in her mind, no reason or method explained. She knows she wants to create an owl. Birds are a fond subject for her. She never knows what shape they will take, she just focuses on pleasing her eye with a pleasant yet capturing image. Her focus sinks deeper into the shapes and contours of the owl's tail as her mind wanders through her life, and what has brought her to this moment, creating this new image of life.

As the sketch continues to take the shape of a wise and beautiful owl, the artist thinks about her own birth and the elements of her own existence that are shaping the creature before her. She was born in 1927 in Ikerrasak, and vividly remembers her first experiences with drawing. Early in her twenties seemed an unusual age to start what many people began as children. Her art started as a way of passing the long hours of the day while she recovered from a battle with Tuberculosis, but she loved this new expression of creativity she had discovered. Art became her, she became art. She was talented in a way no one had seen before. Her images although simple to the eye, were constantly explored deeper, to find their true meaning. She gained respect as an artist quickly. She remembers the connection she had with Johnniebo, a fellow artist and the man she would eventually marry. They shared a great love of art and she fondly recalls

the many days spent stone carving and drawing together. She and Johnniebo had met a creative and intelligent man, by the name of James Houston. It was James that encouraged them to experiment with shapes and colours, carving and textures. He had a great influence on what would become her career, her passion, her life.

*Swish Swish Swish...* The comforting and familiar scratches of lead on paper makes her smile as she thinks about drawings she has completed. She ponders what subject is her favourite. Is it birds? Humans? Spirits? The sun? Birds have always held a special place in her heart, yet to her, all animals, creatures, spirits and objects are valued and respected equally. She knew her community and art lovers alike especially admire her portrayal of majestic birds. She carefully outlines and fills in the owl's sharp talons and powerful feet. She begins the painstaking task of filling in the narrow spaces around the many specks of white on the body of the beast. She pays strong attention to detail, her lines and shapes all pleasing to one another. She adds suiting shapes to the image, not distracting from any particular element. It makes her smile to think of the happiness her drawings bring to people. As the mystical bird continues to fill the page, she considers it intriguing how the progression of a portrait is similar to her own growth as an artist. All drawings begin with an idea, a thought. The thought may be weak or blurry but over time becomes clear and confident. She too, had gone from a timid young artist to an accomplished and skillful master of expression and individualism. The artist alternates between the dark pencil and bold red shades she has chosen to create the portrait. She shades the transitions of colour in a way that is contrasting, but gradual. Her drawing stands out even more among the white paper, as the red and black create a dramatic likeness of the owl's figure. Her eyes are pleased with the image she is seeing, she smiles and continues etching along the page, filling the blankness with the beauty of this new creature.

The portrait is complete. The curves perfectly rounded, it's shading flawless. Perfectly centered on the canvas this new life stares back at its creator. She stares back at the beautiful creature, and with a breath of air as gentle as the hands that lined the page, she clears away the dusting of pencil left behind. What started as a few pale strokes on a backdrop of nothing, has transformed into a powerful image that startles the eye and touches the soul. She carefully places the drawing into a folder, next to the many other

expressive portraits she has completed; not knowing the monumental effect it will soon have on her life. To her the owl is just another portrait, significant to that particular moment in her life; she will later learn it is so much more.

Several months pass, the months turn to years. The owl still lies tucked away, safely surrounded by the spirit and vibrancy of many paintings, sketches and stone carvings. There have been many drawings since the owl, but the owl is always a favourite of onlookers. The viewers of the portrait are always captured by the striking contrast between the deep black and the vibrant red. Colour is a newer medium to her, although at a glance the effects are superior, like she has been using colour for as long as she has known art. The shape of the tail feathers, the detailing on the body and the emotion in the eyes are the expressive detail true to the artist's signature style. She has great power as an artist, drawing two dimensional images yet still having the ability to convey true emotion within those images. The Owl leaves a lasting impression on its viewers, and will soon be unveiled to a wider audience, as wide as all of Canada.

The owl has been chosen. An image of great significance is chosen to be displayed to thousands of Canadians. She knows she has achieved a great success, simply doing what she loves. Expressing herself through art is a privilege she can not imagine living without. She is humble yet pleased with her achievements, as she should be. She wants to be known by her art, not her name. Her art is now so well known that her name has also become recognized as one of great significance.

Kenojuak Ashevak is her name, she is proud to be the first Inuit woman to have her artwork grace a Canada Post stamp, in the year 1970. Over her lifetime she will achieve an astonishing amount of recognition and success, dozens of honours many great Canadians only dream about. Her life will be documented in video, her name surrounded by dozens of other great Canadians on the Walk of Fame, and featured on several other Canadian stamps. Her art was not done for fame, for money or publicity. Her art was her own, a way of expressing the emotions that ran within her, depicting the experiences that touched her life and created the beautiful spirit of Kenojuak.

All she wanted was to do was make something beautiful, and she did.

