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Louise Penny November Newsletter



"It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."

C. S. Lewis

THE BIG MOVE

I love this CS Lewis quote – perhaps mostly for his use of the phrase, “a jolly sight”. It makes me smile. And imagine an egg with wings. Which is a little bit like how I feel right now.

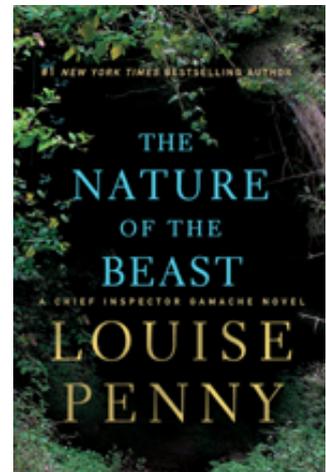
We move this month into our condo. It’s a good thing. But it’s also a difficult thing. This home has been so special. But we leave it to others now, who will also love it, I’m sure.

It also helps that there is no choice. So I’m not burdened with second-guessing. It’s a jolly sight better than lugging around doubt.

It’s been a while since we last moved and I’d forgotten that it actually happens in stages. The home slowly reverts to being just a house, as bits and pieces change. As items get packed away, or given away. As bookcases grow bare and carpets are sent off to be cleaned and furniture is donated or sent to be recovered.

Until finally we’re camping in a couple of rooms in our home. It’s a bit like dementia, actually. Saying goodbye a bit at a time,

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until what had been so familiar and comforting is all but unrecognizable.

We will be very happy in our new place. And we have great friends helping with the transition. Now, I just want to get there. Michael and I will get in the car in a few days and drive to Montreal and stay there until the move is over. And we return to the new nest.

Not easy, but necessary, and rewarding. And comforting to know we're far from alone. I think you might know exactly how this feels.

THE NEXT GAMACHE NOVEL

Am writing away at the next book, still not finished with the first draft. Getting up most days at 5am now to write before the day presses in.

But have to say, the book is such a haven. Genuinely. I sit by the fireplace, on a makeshift table, with a café au lait (the Nespresso machine is leaving in my arms....the last thing out of the house along with Michael and Bishop) tapping away on the laptop. Getting lost in the story.

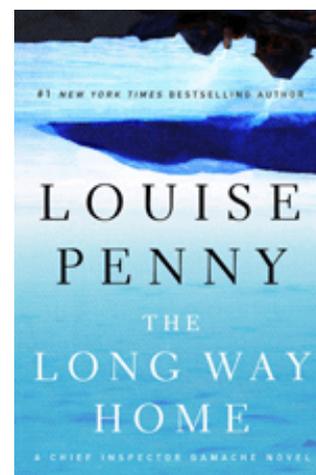
Feeling such calm and comfort in Three Pines. Perhaps it's because it's a world I can control, but I think it goes far deeper than that.

Like Clara and Myrna and even Gamache, Three Pines appeared because I needed to find it. As did you, perhaps.

Am now hoping to finish the first draft any day now, as long as the Nespresso machine doesn't break. If it does, all bets are off!

To be honest, unlike other first drafts, I'm actually feeling that this one is pretty close to what I actually want to say. Often they really are huge stinky messes. This one is jolly sight less of a mess.

I'll let you know in my next letter how the move and how the first



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HERE'S THE ORDER OF THE CHIEF INSPECTOR GAMACHE BOOKS, FROM THE FIRST TO THE MOST RECENT:

STILL LIFE

A FATAL GRACE / DEAD COLD

THE CRUELEST MONTH

A RULE AGAINST MURDER / THE MURDER STONE

THE BRUTAL TELLING

BURY YOUR DEAD

A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY

HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

THE LONG WAY HOME

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

draft have gone. Imperfectly, probably – but nothing that can't be fixed.

A LOVELY LETTER OF SUPPORT

Michael and I have received so many letters of support. I read them all, and many I read to him. It's hard to express just how comforting and powerful your words are. I want to share one of the letters with you. This is from Nora, in Northern California.

When I read in your newsletter that Michael has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, I experienced a jolt of varied emotions. My first thought, "Oh, no. I'm so sorry," was immediately followed by, "Good for you! It is great that you let the world know." My next thought was, "How can I help?"

You have provided me with so many moments of joy, growth, and reflection through your writing, Louise. I hope my sharing some of our story might be helpful to you as you both continue to find your way in this part of your life.

I was lucky enough to sit at the same dinner table with you, Louise, when you presented as part of the Copperfield's Books "Dinners to Die For" series in Santa Rosa, California, in 2013. That evening, you described Michael and your marriage with warm and loving images, spiced with laughter and gentle humor. It was clear to me I was with someone who was part of a very robust, loving marriage. So perhaps that is why I feel bold enough to write to you. You opened your heart to us all.

I'd like to do the same in return.

My husband, Timothy, was diagnosed with an early onset dementia when he was 46 years old. Our children were 6, 10, and 13 years old.

I think I was stuck in numbness for weeks. Then I went to a local information meeting for caregivers and spoke with an instructor there, Kristen. I already knew Kristen in true small-town fashion: I had been her son's speech therapist, our boys had played soccer together, and we shared mutual friends. Kristen was a friendly, people person.

She was easy to talk with. Her Dad had Alzheimer's.

She had begun working in a local senior program just a few months' earlier. When she asked why I was there, at the Caregivers Conference, I know she expected me to report that my mom or dad had Alzheimer's. Her face became still and watchful when I told her about Tim. She then said something that was so helpful to me. Observant, kind Kristen said, "You know, it's not all bad."

She had, it seemed, opened a door and a huge gust of cool wind almost knocked me down. Her words did not jibe with everything else I had so carefully filed inside.

Yet over the weeks and then years, Kristen's words came at me like a herding dog, pushing aside my fearful worries, moving us toward places that were, indeed, not all bad. Time and experience proved she was right. We had so many moments of joy and so much to continue to be thankful for.

Alzheimer's Disease is notorious for taking away memory. Being in the moment is what AD is good at, so it prodded us into living more fully in the moment. AD trained us to focus on "now." It felt good for both of us to work together to accomplish things that had been on our good intentions list.

Tim wrote that novel that had been in his head for years. I typed it for him.

We took that longed-for trip to Ireland. Tim had read and re-read the works of the great Irish writers. Planning our trip was fun. Soon, the ocean winds shoved us along on Sean O'Casey's beloved Island of Inishfree. A jubilant Tim actually won the trivia contest during our Irish Pub Crawl. We celebrated with

Guinness at McDaid's, Brendan Behan's favorite Dublin pub. At Trinity College, we stood arm in arm, in awe of the centuries' old Book of Kells. Not all bad.

Patrice and I had been friends since kindergarten. No matter that I lived in California and she lived in Wisconsin, she simply stated, "You, Tim and the kids need to take a trip back to be with your family in Chicago. I can help." She flew to us. She and I drove the family van across the country, Tim in the passenger seat, one of us driving, the other of us and the three kids in the back. Brian, our 13 year old, precisely fit all of our luggage and paraphernalia into the back of the van daily. Erin, our 6 year old, and Tim laughed together at chipmunks, with the mountains as a backdrop. We pulled into Chicago after Las Vegas, Grand Canyon, Route 66, Mark Twain's home and the Mississippi River. Patrice hung out in her Madison home until we were ready to return. Then she and I shared driving the 2,000 miles back to California. When I thanked her, she shrugged, "This is what friends do. I love you guys." Not bad at all.

Then there was the day Tim loaded the dishes into the dishwasher, and loaded the liquid soap--not dishwasher soap-- into the dispenser. When we discovered the mounds of spewed bubbles that covered the entire kitchen floor, a wry Tim quipped, "Wow. With all these bubbles, there's gotta be champagne here somewhere!"

Tim and I chose to participate in concurrent support groups through our local Alzheimer's Association. We drove 45 minutes each way every Friday to meet with our respective groups. In our groups, Tim and I each fortunately found a haven, a world where others "got it" in a way even our closest loving friends couldn't. Fourteen years later, I remain friends with amazing fellow caregivers, with wonderful women who walked the walk with me at that time.

Walking. Tim and our dog, Pip, walked daily. Their route became routine. Pip led the way. Faithful Pip allowed Tim to stomp along independently without someone hovering about, even--or especially--a well intentioned, loving wife.

While Tim and I did not walk to Augustino's, our small neighborhood restaurant, we certainly enjoyed our date nights there. Dennis, the host, welcomed us weekly with a warm smile and handshake. Over the years, he seated us in the same quiet corner with Tim's back to the noisy and distracting room. As he grew to know us, Dennis intentionally played some of Bill's favorites for the entire restaurant's background music. After many months of dinners there, Tim's plate began arriving with the food pre-cut into manageable bites. I thanked Dennis once. We never again referred to this gentle kindness but to this day, my heart is grateful for Dennis's thoughtful acts.

This diagnosis of Tim's provoked many loving actions by many people. Our friend, Janet, drove an hour from Marin County most Fridays while her sons were in school. She and my movie-loving husband took in the matinee, usually capped by an indulgent trip for sweet-tooth satisfying ice cream. When I asked her how she could cram this into her busy life, she replied, "I love Tim. I want to spend time with him."

Stuart visited Tim every Saturday. He and his then-9-year-old son watched DVDs with Tim. While none of the movies were X-rated, they often were not the best choices for a 9-year old. Stuart advised his son, "Connor, these are fine movies, but please don't tell your mom which movies you're watching with Tim ... or you'll be restricted to Disney movies until you're 43."

Soon after receiving the diagnosis, Tim and I had those important talks. He encouraged me to put myself and the children first. We planned for as many contingencies as we could. He said, "Remember Mother Jones' words, ' Pray for the dead but fight like hell for the living!.' He was clear and strong when he declared, "Let your decisions be guided by what would be best for our children. Fight for our kids."

For our kids, for our family, the time eventually came for Tim to move from our home to Green Haven Board and Care. While years earlier Tim had advised me to implement this plan, he now was not part of this decision. I was quite anxious over this transition.

Our closest friends had become our advisory team. They knew we did not have ready cash to pay out of pocket for this wonderful board and care home. Jill, Ginger, Russell, Sarah, and Kathryn approached me and requested my permission to send out a letter to family and friends requesting financial help. Donations, thankfully and miraculously, came in. Not only our friends and family but also friends of the "Friends of Tim and Nora," people I had never met, sent us donations that funded this interim home for Tim. A lesson for me was that my receiving the kindness of others also provided me with a way to give

to others. A tsunami of reciprocal kindness.

Our advisory team helped me make a plan. Soon, on a Friday morning immediately after we left home for our support groups, friends Ginger and John turned into a furniture moving team. They transported Tim's familiar TV/movie viewing area to his new Green Haven room, positioning his favorite chair, television, family photos and DVDs almost exactly as they had been at home.

Patrice flew from Wisconsin to be with us, as did our Portland friend, Gary. The true clincher was our 13 year old son, Luke. As planned, Tim and I drove to Tim's new home after our groups that day. What was not planned was Luke waiting for us in the parking lot. I was startled and very uncertain. But Luke just sauntered up to the car, leaned into the car window, and said, "Hey, Dad, Casablanca is on the tv. Let's go watch it." That's what they did. The rest of us watched the two of them. The rest of us were parenthetical to that main event of the day. All our love was channeled through Luke on that afternoon.

A few weeks later, I breathed in an unparalleled joy when my husband of 28 years and I danced in the middle of the community room at Green Haven. I closed my eyes and, in his arms, I was transported back in time. The music stopped. I opened my eyes, not jarred by the place in which we were, but rather so very grateful for the love we still shared. Our love needed no words, no recognition of face, no discussion of plans. Our love was a feeling that totally filled and amazed me. I marveled at how much I loved and was loved, how much we trusted and cared for each other.

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Eleanor Roosevelt said,

It is a curious thing in human experience
but to live through a period of
stress and sorrow with another person
creates a bond which nothing
seems able to break.

Louise and Michael, I imagine that you already have that bond in place. You share it not only with each other but also with folks who love you.

May your love grow stronger as you continue to care for each other. I thank you for your sharing of yourselves.

Michael and I have been living through this period of stress and sorrow, but also of unexpected joy, of roaring laughter, of quiet moments of the deepest peace I've ever known. And we have not been alone. So many friends and neighbours have been helping us. They're organizing the move - the packing and even the unpacking, so that we leave one home and return a week later to the new home, all set up for us. Clothes hung in closets, food in cupboards, books on shelves. Fireplaces ready to be lit. All this done by our friends. And it's true - it has created an unbreakable bond.

I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate your emails after the last newsletter. We read them all. But we're so overwhelmed right now, we might not be able to actually reply to you. My Assistant Lise, who is also My Great Friend Lise, has been a titan in these times.

I'll send along a photo in the next letter, so you get to see the new place. We're painting the floors white

– because we want something fresh and cheery and bright. Hope you like what you see. It should be a jolly sight.

Be well, my friend. We're sending out good wishes to you.

Louise, Michael and Bishop

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