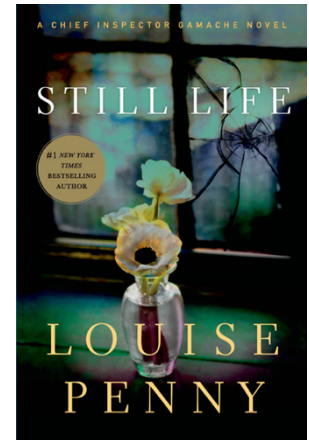




STILL LIFE Chapter 1

Miss Jane Neal met her maker in the early morning mist of Thanksgiving Sunday. It was pretty much a surprise all round. Miss Neal's was not a natural death, unless you're of the belief everything happens as it's supposed to. If so, for her seventy-six years Jane Neal had been walking toward this final moment when death met her in the brilliant maple woods on the verge of the village of Three Pines. She'd fallen spread-eagled, as though making angels in the bright and brittle leaves.



Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the Surete du Quebec knelt down; his knees cracking like the report of a hunter's rifle, his large, expressive hands hovering over the tiny circle of blood marring her fluffy cardigan, as though like a magician he could remove the wound and restore the woman. But he could not. That wasn't his gift. Fortunately for Gamache he had others. The scent of mothballs, his grandmother's perfume, met him halfway. Jane's gentle and kindly eyes stared as though surprised to see him.

He was surprised to see her. That was his little secret. Not that he'd ever seen her before. No. His little secret was that in his mid-fifties, at the height of a long and now apparently stalled career, violent death still surprised him. Which was odd, for the head of homicide, and perhaps one of the reasons he hadn't progressed further in the cynical world of the Surete. Gamache always hoped maybe someone had gotten it wrong, and there was no dead body. But there was no mistaking the increasingly rigid Miss Neal. Straightening up with the help of Inspector Beauvoir, he buttoned his lined Burberry against the October chill and wondered.

Jane Neal had also been late, but in a whole other sense, a few days earlier. She'd arranged to meet her dear friend and next-door neighbor Clara Morrow for coffee in the village bistro. Clara sat at the table by the window and waited. Patience was not her long suit. The mixture of *cafe au lait* and impatience was producing an exquisite vibration. Throbbing slightly, Clara stared out the mullioned window at the village green and the old homes and maple trees that circled the Commons. The trees, turning breathtaking shades of red and amber, were just about the only things that did change in this venerable village.

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Framed by the mullions, she saw a pickup truck drift down rue du Moulin into the village, a beautiful dappled doe draped languidly over its hood. Slowly the truck circled the Commons, halting villagers in mid-step. This was hunting season and hunting territory. But hunters like these were mostly from Montreal or other cities. They'd rent pick-ups and stalk the dirt roads at dawn and dusk like behemoths at feeding time, looking for deer. And when they spotted one they'd slither to a stop, step out of the truck and fire. Not all hunters were like that, Clara knew, but enough of them were. Those same hunters would strap the deer on to the hood of their truck and drive around the countryside believing the dead animal on the vehicle somehow announced that great men had done this.

Every year the hunters shot cows and horses and family pets and each other. And, unbelievably, they sometimes shot themselves, perhaps in a psychotic episode where they mistook themselves for dinner. It was a wise person who knew that some hunters - not all, but some - found it challenging to distinguish a pine from a partridge from a person.

Clara wondered what had become of Jane. She was rarely late, so she could easily be forgiven. Clara found it easy to forgive most things in most people. Too easy, her husband Peter often warned. But Clara had her own little secret. She didn't really let go of everything. Most things, yes. But some she secretly held and hugged and would visit in moments when she needed to be comforted by the unkindness of others.

Croissant crumbs had tumbled on top of the *Montreal Gazette* left at her table. Between flakes Clara scanned the headlines: 'Parti Quebecois Vows to Hold Sovereignty Referendum', 'Drug Bust in Townships', 'Hikers Lost in Tremblant Park'.

Clara lifted her eyes from the morose headlines. She and Peter had long since stopped subscribing to the Montreal papers. Ignorance really was bliss. They preferred the local *Williamsburg County News* where they could read about Wayne's cow, or Guylaine's visiting grandchildren, or a quilt being auctioned for the seniors' home. Every now and then Clara wondered if they were copping out, running away from reality and responsibility. Then she realised she didn't care. Besides, she learned everything she really needed to survive right here at Olivier's Bistro, in the heart of Three Pines.

'You're a million miles away,' came the familiar and well-loved voice. There was Jane, out of breath and smiling, her laugh-lined face pink from the autumn chill and the brisk trot from her cottage across the village green.



'Sorry I'm late,' she whispered into Clara's ear as the two hugged, one tiny, plump and breathless, the other thirty years younger, slim, and still vibrating from the caffeine high. 'You're trembling,' said Jane, sitting down and ordering her own *café au lait*. 'I didn't know you cared so much.'

'Filthy old hag,' laughed Clara.

'I was this morning, that's for sure. Did you hear what happened?'

'No, what happened?' Clara leaned forward eager for the news. She and Peter had been in Montreal buying canvases and acrylics for their work. Both were artists. Peter, a success. Clara as yet was undiscovered and, most of her friends secretly felt, was likely to remain that way if she persisted in her unfathomable works. Clara had to admit her series of warrior uteruses were mostly lost on the buying public, though her household items with bouffant hair and huge feet had enjoyed a certain success. She'd sold one. The rest, roughly fifty of them, were in their basement, which looked a lot like Walt Disney's workshop.

'No,' whispered Clara a few minutes later, genuinely shocked. In the twenty-five years she'd lived in Three Pines she'd never, ever heard of a crime. The only reason doors were locked was to prevent neighbors from dropping off baskets of zucchini at harvest time. True, as the *Gazette* headline made clear, there was another crop that equaled zucchini in scope: marijuana. But those not involved tried to turn a blind eye.

Beyond that, there was no crime. No break-ins, no vandalism, no assaults. There weren't even any police in Three Pines. Every now and then Robert Lemieux with the local Surete would drive around the Commons, just to show the colors, but there was no need.

Until that morning.

'Could it have been a joke?' Clara struggled with the ugly image Jane had painted.

'No. It was no joke,' said Jane, remembering. 'One of the boys laughed. It was kind of familiar, now that I think of it. Not a funny laugh.' Jane turned her clear blue eyes on Clara. Eyes full of wonderment. 'It was a sound I'd heard as a teacher. Not often, thank God. It's the sound boys make when they're hurting something and enjoying it.' Jane shivered at the recollection, and pulled her cardigan around her. 'An ugly sound. I'm glad you weren't there.'

She said this just as Clara reached across the round dark wood table and held Jane's cold, tiny hand and wished with all her heart she had been there instead of Jane.



'They were just kids, you say?'

'They wore ski masks, so it was hard to tell, but I think I recognised them.'

'Who were they?'

'Philippe Croft, Gus Hennessey and Claude LaPierre,' Jane whispered the names, looking around to make sure no one could overhear.

'Are you sure?' Clara knew all three boys. They weren't exactly the Boy Scout types, but neither were they the sort to do this.

'No,' admitted Jane.

'Better not tell anyone else.'

'Too late.'

'What do you mean, "too late"?'

'I said their names this morning, while it was happening.'

'Said their names in a whisper?' Clara could feel the blood tumbling from her fingers and toes, rushing to her core, to her heart. Please, please, please, she silently begged.

'I yelled.'

Seeing Clara's expression, Jane hurried to justify herself. 'I wanted to stop them. It worked. They stopped.'

Jane could still see the boys running away, tripping up du Moulin, out of the village. The one in the brilliant-green mask had turned to look back at her. His hands were still dripping duck manure. The manure put there as autumn mulch for the flower beds on the village green, and not yet spread. She wished she could have seen the boy's expression. Was he angry? Scared? Amused?

'So you were right. About their names, I mean.'

'Probably. I never thought I'd live to see the day this would happen here.'

'So that was why you were late? You had to clean up?'

'Yes. Well, no.'

'Could you be more vague?'

'Maybe. You're on the jury for the next Arts Williamsburg show, right?'

'Yes. We're meeting this afternoon. Peter's on it too. Why?'

Clara was almost afraid to breathe. Could this be it? After all her cajoling and gentle ribbing, and sometimes not-so-gentle shoving, was Jane about to do it?



'I'm ready.' Jane gave the biggest exhale Clara had ever seen. The force of it sent a squall of croissant flakes from the front page of the *Gazette* on to Clara's lap.

'I was late,' said Jane slowly, her own hands beginning to tremble, 'because I had to decide. I have a painting I'd like to enter into the show.'

With that she started to cry.

Jane's art had been an open secret in Three Pines for ever. Every now and then someone walking in the woods or through a field would stumble upon her, concentrating on a canvas. But she'd made them swear that they wouldn't approach, wouldn't look, would avert their eyes as though witnessing an act almost obscene, and certainly would never speak of it. The only time Clara had seen Jane angry was when Gabri had come up behind her while she'd been painting. He thought she'd been joking when she'd warned them never to look.

He was wrong. She'd been deadly serious. It had actually taken a few months for Jane and Gabri to get back to a normal friendship; both had felt betrayed by the other. But their natural good nature and affection for each other had healed the rift. Still, it had served as a lesson.

No one was to see Jane's art.

Until now, apparently. But now the artist was overcome with an emotion so strong she sat in the Bistro and wept. Clara was both horrified and terrified. She looked furtively around, partly in hopes no one was watching, and partly desperately hoping someone was, and would know what to do. Then she asked herself the simple question that she carried with her and consulted like a rosary. What would Jane do? And she had her answer. Jane would let her cry, would let her wail. Would let her throw crockery, if she needed to. And Jane would not run away. When the maelstrom passed, Jane would be there. And then she would put her arms around Clara, and comfort her, and let her know she was not alone. Never alone. And so Clara sat and watched and waited. And knew the agony of doing nothing. Slowly the crying subsided.

Clara rose with exaggerated calm. She took Jane in her arms and felt the old body creak back into place. Then she said a little prayer of thanks to the gods that give grace. The grace to cry and the grace to watch.

'Jane, if I'd known it was this painful I'd never have kept at you to show your art. I'm so sorry.'



'Oh, no, dear,' Jane reached across the table where they were sitting once again, and took Clara's hands, 'you don't understand. Those weren't tears of pain. No. I was surprised by joy.' Jane gazed far off and nodded, as though carrying on a private conversation. 'Finally.'

'What's it called, your painting?'

'*Fair Day*. It's of the closing parade of the county fair.'

And so it was that on the Friday before Thanksgiving the painting was lifted on to an easel in the gallery of Arts Williamsburg. It was wrapped in butcher's paper and tied with string, like a child's bundle, against the cold, cruel elements. Slowly, meticulously, Peter Morrow picked at the knot, tugging the string until it came loose. Then he wound the old string around his palm as though winding yarn. Clara could have killed him. She was ready to shriek, to jump from her chair and shove him aside. To fling the pathetic bundle of string to the ground, and perhaps Peter with it, and tear the waxed paper from the canvas. Her face became even more placid, though her eyes had begun to bulge.

Peter neatly unfolded first one corner of the paper then the other, smoothing the creases with his hand. Clara had no idea a rectangle had so many corners. She could feel the edge of her chair cutting into her bottom. The rest of the jury, assembled to judge the submissions, looked bored. Clara had enough anxiety for them all.

Every last corner was finally smooth and the paper was ready to be removed. Peter turned around to face the other four jurors and make a little speech before revealing the work beneath. Something short and tasteful, he felt. A bit of context, a bit of - he caught his wife's bulging eyes in her purple face and knew that when Clara became abstract it was no time for speechifying.

He quickly turned back to the painting and whipped the brown paper off, revealing *Fair Day*.

Clara's jaw dropped. Her head jerked down as though suddenly insupportable. Her eyes widened and her breathing stopped. It was as though she'd died, for an instant. So this was *Fair Day*. It took her breath away. And clearly the other jurors felt the same way. There were varying degrees of disbelief on the semi-circle of faces. Even the chairperson, Elise Jacob, was silent. She actually looked like she was having a stroke.



Clara hated judging other people's work, and this was the worst so far. She'd kicked herself all the way there for convincing Jane to enter her first work ever for public viewing in an exhibition she herself was judging. Was it ego? Was it mere stupidity?

'This work is called *Fair Day*,' read Elise from her notes. 'It's being submitted by Jane Neal of Three Pines, a long-time supporter of Arts Williamsburg, but her first submission.' Elise looked around. 'Comments?'

'It's wonderful,' Clara lied. The others looked at her in astonishment. Facing them on the easel was an unframed canvas and the subject was obvious. The horses looked like horses, the cows were cows, and the people were all recognisable, not only as people but as specific people from the village. But they were all stick figures. Or at least perhaps one evolutionary notch up from stick figures. In a war between a stick figure army and these people in *Fair Day*, the *Fair Day* people would win, only because they had a little more muscle. And fingers. But it was clear that these people lived in only two dimensions. Clara, in trying to grasp what she was looking at, and trying not to make the obvious comparisons, felt that it was a little like a cave drawing put on canvas. If Neanderthals had county fairs, this was what they'd have looked like.

'*Mon Dieu*. My four-year-old can do better than that,' said Henri Lariviere, making the obvious comparison. Henri had been a laborer in a quarry before discovering that the stone spoke to him. And he listened. There was no going back after that, of course, though his family longed for the day when he made at least the minimum wage instead of huge stone sculptures. His face now, as ever, was broad and rough and inscrutable, but his hands spoke for him. They were turned up in a simple and eloquent gesture of appeal, of surrender. He was struggling to find the appropriate words, knowing that Jane was a friend of many of the jurors. 'It's awful.' He'd clearly given up the struggle and reverted to the truth. Either that or his description was actually kind compared to what he really thought.

In bold, bright colors Jane's work showed the parade just before the closing of the fair. Pigs were distinguishable from goats only because they were bright red. The children looked like little adults. In fact, thought Clara leaning tentatively forward as though the canvas might deal her another blow, those aren't children. They're small adults. She recognised Olivier and Gabri leading the blue rabbits. In the stands beyond the parade sat the crowd, many of them in profile, looking at each other, or looking away from each other. Some, not many, looked straight



at Clara. All the cheeks had perfect round red circles, denoting, Clara supposed, a healthy glow. It was awful.

'Well, that's easy enough at least,' said Irene Calfat. 'That's a reject.'

Clara could feel her extremities grow cold and numb. Irene Calfat was a potter. She took hunks of clay and turned them into exquisite works. She'd pioneered a new way to glaze her works and was now sought out by potters worldwide. Of course, after they'd made the pilgrimage to Irene Calfat's studio in St Remy and spent five minutes with the Goddess of Mud, they knew they'd made a mistake. She was one of the most self absorbed and petty people on the face of this earth.

Clara wondered how a person so devoid of normal human emotions could create works of such beauty. While you yourself struggle, said the nasty little voice that kept her company.

Over the rim of her mug she peeked at Peter. He had a piece of chocolate cupcake stuck to his face. Instinctively, Clara wiped her own face, inadvertently smearing a walnut into her hair. Even with that hunk of chocolate on his face Peter was riveting. Classically handsome. Tall, broad-shouldered like a lumberjack, not the delicate artist he was. His wavy hair was gray now, and he wore glasses all the time, and lines scored the corners of his eyes and his clean-shaven face. In his early fifties, he looked like a businessman on an outward bound adventure. Most mornings Clara would wake up and watch while he slept, and want to crawl inside his skin and wrap herself around his heart and keep him safe.

Clara's head acted as a food magnet. She was the Carmen Miranda of baked goods. Peter, on the other hand, was always immaculate. It could be raining mud and he would return home cleaner than when he went out. But sometimes, some glorious times, his natural aura failed him and a piece of something stuck to his face. Clara knew she should tell him. But didn't.

'Do you know,' said Peter and even Irene looked at him, 'I think it's great.'

Irene snorted and shot a meaningful look at Henri who just ignored her. Peter sought out Clara and held her gaze for a moment, a kind of touchstone. When Peter walked into a room he always swept it until he found Clara. And then he relaxed. The outside world saw a tall, distinguished man with his disheveled wife, and wondered why. Some, principally Peter's mother, even seemed to consider it a violation of nature. Clara was his centre and all that was good and healthy and happy about him. When he looked at her he didn't see the wild, untamable hair, the billowing frocks, the Dollar-rama store horn-rimmed spectacles. No. He saw



his safe harbor. Although, granted, at this moment he also saw a walnut in her hair, which was pretty much an identifying characteristic. Instinctively, he put his hand up to brush his own hair, knocking the piece of cupcake from his cheek.

'What do you see?' Elise asked Peter.

'Honestly, I don't know. But I know we need to accept it.'

This brief answer somehow gave his opinion even more credibility.

'It's a risk,' said Elise.

'I agree,' said Clara. 'But what's the worst that can happen? That people who see the show might think we've made a mistake? They always think that.'

Elise nodded in appreciation.

'I'll tell you what the risk is,' said Irene, the 'you idiots' implied as she plowed on. 'This is a community group and we barely make ends meet. Our only value is our credibility. Once it's believed we accept works based not on their value as art but because we like the artist, as a clique of friends, we're ruined. That's the risk. No one will take us seriously. Artists won't want to show here for fear of being tainted. The public won't come because they know all they'll see is crap like - ' here words failed her and she merely pointed at the canvas.

Then Clara saw it. Just a flash, something niggling on the outer reaches of her consciousness. For the briefest moment *Fair Day* shimmered. The pieces came together, then the moment passed. Clara realised she'd stopped breathing again, but she also realised that she was looking at a work of great art. Like Peter, she didn't know why or how, but in that instant that world which had seemed upside down righted. She knew *Fair Day* was an extraordinary work.

'I think it's more than wonderful, I think it's brilliant,' she said.

'Oh, please. Can't you see she's just saying that to support her husband?'

'Irene, we've heard your opinion. Go on, Clara,' said Elise. Henri leaned forward, his chair groaning.

Clara got up and walked slowly to the work on the easel. It touched her deep down in a place of such sadness and loss it was all she could do not to weep. How could this be? she asked herself. The images were so childish, so simple. Silly almost, with dancing geese and smiling people. But there was something else. Something just beyond her grasp.



'I'm sorry. This is embarrassing,' she smiled, feeling her cheeks burning, 'but I actually can't explain it.'

'Why don't we set *Fair Day* aside and look at the rest of the works. We'll come back to it at the end.'

The rest of the afternoon went fairly smoothly. The sun was getting low, making the room even colder by the time they looked at *Fair Day* again. Everyone was wiped out and just wanted this to be over. Peter flipped on the overhead spotlights and lifted Jane's work on to the easel.

'D'accord. Has anyone changed their mind about Fair Day?' Elise asked.

Silence.

'I make it two in favor of accepting and two against.' Elise stared quietly at *Fair Day*. She knew Jane Neal in passing and liked what she saw. She'd always struck Elise as a sensible, kind and intelligent woman. A person you'd want to spend time with. How was it this woman had created this slapdash, childish work? But. And a new thought entered her head. Not, actually, an original thought or even new to Elise, but a new one for this day.

'Fair Day is accepted. It'll be shown with the other works of art.'

Clara leapt up with delight, toppling her chair.

'Oh, come on,' said Irene.

'Exactly! Well done. You've both proven my point.' Elise smiled.

'What point?'

'For whatever reason, *Fair Day* challenges us. It moves us. To anger,' here Elise acknowledged Irene, 'to confusion,' a brief but meaningful look at Henri who nodded his grizzled head slightly, 'to .. .' a glance at Peter and Clara.

'Joy,' said Peter at the very moment Clara said, 'Sorrow.' They looked at each other and laughed.

'Now, I look at it and feel, like Henri, simply confused. The truth is I don't know whether *Fair Day* is a brilliant example of naive art, or the pathetic scrawling of a superbly untalented, and delusional, old woman. That's the tension. And that's why it must be part of the show. I can guarantee you it's the one work people will be talking about in the cafes after the *vernissage*.'



'Hideous,' said Ruth Zardo later that evening, leaning on her cane and swigging Scotch. Peter and Clara's friends were gathered in their living room, around the murmuring fireplace for a pre-Thanksgiving dinner.

It was the lull before the onslaught. Family and friends, invited or not, would arrive the next day and manage to stay through the Thanksgiving long weekend. The woods would be full of hikers and hunters, an unfortunate combination. The annual touch football game would be held on the village green on Saturday morning, followed by the harvest market in the afternoon, a last ditch effort to download tomatoes and zucchini. That evening the bonfire would be lit filling Three Pines with the delicious scent of burning leaves and wood, and the suspicious undercurrent of gazpacho.

Three Pines wasn't on any tourist map, being too far off any main or even secondary road. Like Narnia, it was generally found unexpectedly and with a degree of surprise that such an elderly village should have been hiding in this valley all along. Anyone fortunate enough to find it once usually found their way back. And Thanksgiving, in early October, was the perfect time. The weather was usually crisp and clear, the summer scents of old garden roses and phlox were replaced by musky autumn leaves, woodsmoke and roast Turkey.

Olivier and Gabri were recounting that morning's events. Their description was so vivid everyone in the snug living room could see the three masked boys picking up handfuls of duck manure from the edge of the village green: the boys lifted their hands, the manure sliding between their fingers, and then hurled the stuff at the old brick building. Soon the blue and white Campari awnings were dripping. Manure was sliding off the walls. The 'Bistro' sign was splattered. In moments, the pristine face of the cafe in the heart of Three Pines was filthy, and not just with duck poop. The village had become soiled by the words that filled the startled air: 'Fags! Queers! *Degueulasse!*' the boys screamed.

As Jane listened to Olivier and Gabri, she recalled how she had emerged from her tiny stone cottage across the green and, hurrying over, had seen Olivier and Gabri come out of the Bistro. The boys had roared their delight and aimed at the two men, striking them with the manure.

Jane had picked up her pace, wishing her stout legs longer. Then she'd seen Olivier do the most extraordinary thing. As the boys screamed and hauled off handfuls of mulch, Olivier had slowly, deliberately, gently taken Gabri's hand and held it before gracefully lifting it to his



lips. The boys had watched, momentarily stunned, as Olivier had kissed Gabri's manure-stained hand with his manure-stained lips. The boys had seemed petrified by this act of love and defiance. But just for a moment. Their hatred triumphed and soon their attack had re-doubled.

'Stop that!' Jane had called firmly.

Their arms had halted in mid-swing, instinctively reacting to a voice of authority. Turning as one they'd seen little Jane Neal, in her floral dress and yellow cardigan, bearing down on them. One of the boys, wearing an orange mask, had lifted his arm to toss at her.

'Don't you dare, young man.'

He hesitated just long enough for Jane to look them all in the eyes.

'Philippe Croft, Gus Hennessey, Claude LaPierre,' she'd said, slowly and distinctly. That had done it. The boys dropped their handfuls and ran, shooting past Jane and tripping up the hill, the one in the orange mask laughing. It was a sound so foul it even eclipsed the manure. One boy turned and looked back as the others careered into him and shoved him back up du Moulin.

It had happened only that morning. It already seemed like a dream.

'It was hideous,' said Gabri, agreeing with Ruth as he dropped into one of the old chairs, its faded fabric warmed by the fire. 'Of course they were right; I *am* gay.'

'And,' said Olivier, lounging on the arm of Gabri's chair, 'quite queer.'

'I have become one of the stately homos of Quebec,' Gabri paraphrased Quentin Crisp. 'My views are breathtaking.'

Olivier laughed and Ruth threw another log on the fire.

'You did look very stately this morning,' said Ben Hadley, Peter's best friend.

'Don't you mean estatey?'

'More like the back forty, it's true.'

In the kitchen, Clara was greeting Myrna Landers. 'The table looks wonderful,' said Myrna, peeling off her coat and revealing a bright purple kaftan. Clara wondered how she squeezed through doorways. Myrna then dragged in her contribution to the evening, a flower arrangement. 'Where would you like it, child?'



Clara gawked. Like Myrna herself, her bouquets were huge, effusive and unexpected. This one contained oak and maple branches, bulrushes from the Riviere Bella Bella which ran behind Myrna's bookshop, apple branches with a couple of McIntoshes still on them, and great armfuls of herbs.

'What's this?'

'Where?'

'Here, in the middle of the arrangement.'

'A kielbassa.'

'A sausage?'

'Hummuh, and look in there,' Myrna pointed into the tangle.

'*The Collected Works of W. H. Auden*,' Clara read.

'You're kidding.'

'It's for the boys.'

'What else is in there?' Clara scanned the Immense arrangement.

'Denzel Washington. But don't tell Gabri.'

In the living room, Jane continued the story: '... then Gabri said to me, "I have your mulch. This is just the way Vita Sackville West always wore it."'

Olivier whispered in Gabri's ear, 'You are queer.'

'Aren't you glad one of us is?' a well-worn and comfortable jest.

'How are you?' Myrna came in from the kitchen, followed by Clara, and hugged Gabri and Olivier while Peter poured her Scotch.

'I think we're all right,' Olivier kissed Myrna on both cheeks. 'It's probably surprising this didn't happen sooner. We've been here for what? Twelve years?' Gabri nodded, his mouth full of Camembert. 'And this is the first time we've been bashed. I was gay bashed in Montreal when I was a kid, by a group of grown men. That was terrifying.' They'd grown silent, and there was just the crackling and muttering of the fire in the background as Olivier spoke.

'They hit me with sticks. It's funny, but when I think back that's the most painful part. Not the scrapes and bruises, but before they hit me they kind of poked, you know?' He jabbed with one arm to mimic their movements. 'It was as though I wasn't human.'



'That's the necessary first step,' said Myrna. 'They dehumanise their victim. You've put it well.'

She spoke from experience. Before coming to Three Pines she'd been a psychologist in Montreal. And, being black, she knew that singular expression when people saw her as furniture.

Ruth turned to Olivier, changing the subject. 'I was in the basement and came across a few things I thought you could sell for me.' Ruth's basement was her bank.

'Great. What?'

'There's some cranberry glass-'

'Oh, wonderful.' Olivier adored colored glass. 'Hand blown?'

'Do you take me for an idiot? Of course they're hand blown.'

'Are you sure you don't want them?' he always asked this of his friends.

'Stop asking me that. Do you think I'd mention them if there was a doubt?'

'Bitch.'

'Slut.'

'OK, tell me more,' said Olivier. The stuff Ruth hauled up from her basement was incredible. It was as though she had a porthole to the past. Some of it was junk, like the old broken-down coffee makers and burned-out toasters. But most made him tremble with pleasure. The greedy antique dealer in him, which composed a larger part of his make-up than he'd ever admit, was thrilled to have exclusive access to Ruth's treasures. He'd sometimes daydream about that basement.

If he was excited by Ruth's possessions, he was positively beside himself with lust after Jane's home. He'd kill to see beyond her kitchen door. Her kitchen alone was worth tens of thousands of dollars in antiques. When he'd first come to Three Pines, at the Drama Queen's insistence, he was reduced almost to incoherence when he saw the linoleum on Jane's mudroom floor. If the mudroom was a museum and the kitchen a shrine, what in the world lay beyond? Olivier shook off the thought, knowing he would probably be disappointed. IKEA. And shag carpet. He'd long since stopped thinking it strange that Jane had never invited anyone through the swinging door into her living room and beyond.

'About the mulch, Jane,' Gabri was saying, his bulk bending over one of Peter's jigsaw puzzles, 'I can get it to you tomorrow. Do you need help cutting back your garden?'



'No, almost done. But this might be the last year. It's getting beyond me.' Gabri was relieved he didn't have to help. Doing his own garden was work enough.

'I have a whole lot of hollyhock babies,' said Jane, fitting in a piece of the sky. 'How did those single yellows do for you? I didn't notice them.'

'I put them in last fall, but they never called me mother. Can I have some more? I'll trade you for some monarda.'

'God, don't do that.' Monarda was the zucchini of the flower world. It, too, figured prominently in the harvest market and, subsequently, the Thanksgiving bonfire, which would give off a hint of sweet bergamot so that it smelled as though every cottage in Three Pines was brewing Earl Grey tea.

'Did we tell you what happened this afternoon after you'd all left?' Gabri said in his stage voice, so that the words fell neatly into every ear in the room. 'We were just getting the peas ready for tonight' - Clara rolled her eyes and mumbled to Jane, 'Probably lost the can opener.' - 'when the doorbell rang and there were Matthew Croft and Philippe.'

'No! What happened?'

'Philippe mumbled, "I'm sorry about this morning."'

'What did you say?' Myrna asked.

'Prove it,' said Olivier.

'You didn't,' hooted Clara, amused and impressed.

'I most certainly did. There was a lack of sincerity about the apology. He was sorry he got caught and sorry there were consequences. But I didn't believe he was sorry about what he did.'

'Conscience and cowardice,' said Clara.

'What do you mean?' asked Ben.

'Oscar Wilde said that conscience and cowardice are the same thing. What stops us from doing horrible things isn't our conscience but the fear of getting caught.'

'I wonder if that's true,' said Jane.

'Would you?' Myrna asked Clara.

'Do terrible things if I could get away with it?'

'Cheat on Peter,' suggested Olivier. 'Steal from the bank. Or better still, steal another artist's work?'



'Ah, kids stuff,' snapped Ruth. 'Now, take murder, for instance. Would you mow someone down with your car? Or poison them, maybe, or throw them into the Bella Bella during spring run off? Or,' she looked around, warm firelight reflecting off slightly concerned faces, 'or we could set a fire and then not save them.'

'What do you mean, "we", white woman?' said Myrna. Myrna brought the conversation back from the edge.

'The truth? Sure. But not murder.' Clara looked over at Ruth who simply gave her a conspiratorial wink.

'Imagine a world where you could do anything. Anything. And get away with it,' said Myrna, warming to the topic again. 'What power. Who here wouldn't be corrupted?'

'Jane wouldn't,' said Ruth with certainty. 'But the rest of you?' she shrugged.

'And you?' Olivier asked Ruth, more than a little annoyed to be lumped in where he secretly knew he belonged.

'Me? But you know me well enough by now, Olivier. I'd be the worst. I'd cheat, and steal, and make all your lives hell.'

'Worse than now?' asked Olivier, still peeved.

'Now you're on the list,' said Ruth. And Olivier remembered that the closest thing they had to a police force was the volunteer fire brigade, of which he was a member but of which Ruth was the chief. When Ruth Zardo ordered you into a conflagration, you went. She was scarier than a burning building.

'Gabri, what about you?' Clara asked.

'There've been times I've been mad enough to kill, and may have, had I known I would get away with it.'

'What made you that angry?' Clara was astonished.

'Betrayal, always and only betrayal.'

'What did you do about it?' asked Myrna.

'Therapy. That was where I met this guy.' Gabri reached out and patted Olivier's hand. 'I think we both went to that therapist for about a year longer than we had to just to see each other in the waiting room.'

'Is that sick?' said Olivier, smoothing a lock of his immaculate, thinning blond hair off his face. It was like silk, and kept falling into his eyes, no matter what products he used.



'Mock me if you will, but everything happens for a reason,' Gabri said. 'No betrayal, no rage. No rage, no therapy. No therapy, no Olivier. No Olivier no-'

'Enough.' Olivier held up his hands in surrender.

'I've always liked Matthew Croft,' said Jane.

'Did you teach him?' asked Clara.

'Long time ago. He was in the second to last class at the old schoolhouse here, before it closed.'

'I still think that was a shame they closed it,' said Ben.

'For God's sake, Ben, the school closed twenty years ago. Move on.' Only Ruth would say this.

When she first came to Three Pines, Myrna had wondered whether Ruth had had a stroke. Sometimes, Myrna knew from her practice, stroke victims had very little impulse control. When she asked about it, Clara said if Ruth had had a stroke it was in the womb. As far as she knew, Ruth had always been like this.

'Then why does everyone like her?' Myrna had asked. Clara had laughed and shrugged, 'You know there are days I ask myself the same thing. What a piece of work that woman can be. But she's worth the effort, I think.' 'Anyway,' Gabri huffed now, having temporarily lost the spotlight. 'Philippe agreed to work for fifteen hours, volunteer, around the Bistro.'

'Bet he wasn't happy about that,' said Peter, getting to his feet.

'You got that right,' said Olivier with a grin.

'I want to propose a toast,' said Gabri. 'To our friends, who stood by us today. To our friends who spent all morning cleaning the Bistro.' It was a phenomenon Myrna had noticed before, some people's ability to turn a terrible event into a triumph. She'd thought about it that morning, manure under her fingernails, pausing for a moment to look at the people, young and old, pitching in. And she was one of them. And she blessed, again, the day she'd decided to quit the city and come here and sell books to these people. She was finally home. Then another image came back to her, one that had gotten lost in the activity of the morning. Of Ruth leaning on her cane, turning away from the others, so that only Myrna could see the wince of pain as the elderly woman lowered herself to her knees, and silently scrubbed. All morning.

'Dinner's ready,' Peter called.



'Formidable. Just like dear Mama. Le Sieur?' Jane asked a few minutes later, bringing a forkful of mushy peas and gravy to her mouth.

'*Bien sur*. From Monsieur Beliveau.' Olivier nodded.

'Oh, for God's sake,' Clara called down the groaning pine table. 'They're canned peas! From the general store. You call yourself a chef!'

'*Le Sieur* is the gold standard for canned peas. Keep this up, missy, and you'll get the no-name brand next year. No gratitude,' Olivier stage-whispered to Jane, 'and on Thanksgiving, too. Shameful.'

They ate by candlelight, the candles of all shapes and sizes flickering around the kitchen. Their plates were piled high with turkey and chestnut stuffing, candied yams and potatoes, peas and gravy. They'd all brought something to eat, except Ben, who didn't cook. But he'd brought bottles of wine, which was even better. It was a regular get-together, and pot-luck was the only way Peter and Clara could afford to hold a dinner party.

Olivier leaned over to Myrna, 'Another great flower arrangement.'

'Thank you. Actually, there's something hidden in there for you two.'

'Really!' Gabri was on his feet in an instant. His long legs propelled his bulk across the kitchen to the arrangement. Unlike Olivier, who was self-contained and even fastidious, like a cat, Gabri was more like a St Bernard, though mostly without the slobber. He carefully examined the complex forest and then shrieked. 'Just what I've always wanted.' He pulled out the kielbassa.

'Not that. That's for Clara.' Everyone looked at Clara with alarm, especially Peter. Olivier looked relieved. Gabri reached in again and gingerly extracted the thick book.

'*The Collected Works of W H. Auden*.' Gabri tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice. But not too hard. 'I don't know him.'

'Oh, Gabri, you're in for a treat,' said Jane.

'All right, I can't stand it any more,' Ruth said suddenly, leaning across the table to Jane. 'Did Arts Williamsburg accept your work?'

'Yes.'

It was as though the word triggered springs in their chairs. Everyone was catapulted to their feet, shooting toward Jane who stood and accepted their hugs with enthusiasm. She seemed to glow brighter than any of the candles in the room. Standing back for an instant and



watching the scene, Clara felt her heart contract and her spirit lighten and felt fortunate indeed to be part of this moment.

'Great artists put a lot of themselves into their work,' said Clara when the chairs had been regained.

'What's *Fair Day's* special meaning?' Ben asked.

'Now, that would be cheating. You have to figure it out. It's there.' Jane turned to Ben, smiling. 'You'll figure it out, I'm sure.'

'Why's it called *Fair Day*?' he asked.

'It was painted at the county fair, the closing parade.' Jane gave Ben a meaningful look. His mother, her friend, Timmer, had died that afternoon. Was it only a month ago? The whole village had been at the parade, except Timmer, dying of cancer alone in bed, while her son Ben was away in Ottawa at an antiques auction. Clara and Peter had been the ones to break the news to him. Clara would never forget the look on his face when Peter told him his mother was dead. Not sadness, not even pain, yet. But utter disbelief. He wasn't the only one.

'Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table,' Jane said almost under her breath. 'Auden,' she explained, nodding to the book in Gabri's hand and flashing a smile that broke the unexpected, and unexplained, tension.

'I might just sneak down and take a look at *Fair Day* before the show,' said Ben.

Jane took a deep breath. 'I'd like to invite you all over for drinks after the opening of the exhibition. In the living room.' Had she said 'In the nude' they wouldn't have been more amazed. 'I have a bit of a surprise for you.'

'No kidding,' said Ruth.

Stomachs full of turkey and pumpkin pie, port and espresso, the tired guests walked home, their flashlights bobbing like huge fireflies. Jane kissed Peter and Clara good-night. It had been a comfortable, unremarkable early Thanksgiving with friends. Clara watched Jane make her way along the winding path through the woods that joined their two homes. Long after Jane had disappeared from view her flashlight could be seen, a bright white light, like Diogenes. Only when Clara heard the eager barking of Jane's dog Lucy did she gently close her door. Jane was home.

Safe.

