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Still Life

Written by Louise Penny

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STILL LIFE

Louise Penny

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This book is given, along with all my heart, to Michael

ONE

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 Sûreté 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 Sûreté. 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 *café 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.

Framed by the mullions, she saw a pick-up 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 Sûreté 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 Irenée Calfat. 'That's a reject.'

Clara could feel her extremities grow cold and numb.

Irenée 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 Irenée Calfat's studio in St Rémy 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 Irenée looked at him, 'I think it's great.'

Irenée 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 Irenée, 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?'

'Irenée, 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 Irenée.

'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 Irenée, '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 cafés after the *vernissage*.'

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