

Globe Life

The Literary Traveller

A Quebec country Christmas

Louise Penny's Inspector Gamache books have given rise to literary tourism in the Eastern Townships. Now, the award-winning mystery writer shares a Sutton Christmas miracle

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Michael and I had been married five years when we moved from Montreal to Sutton, in Quebec's Eastern Townships. It was his second marriage, after losing his first wife, and my only marriage, having spent my life in a primary relationship with myself.

Now it was time to love someone else.

And, more than that, actually accommodate someone else.

In the course of our everyday lives, this was difficult enough, but at the holidays it demanded a Christmas miracle. We had our own separate, and surprisingly intractable, traditions. He went to midnight mass at the huge St. Patrick's Cathedral. I did not.

I, quite rightly, opened the stocking gifts first on Christmas morning, then had breakfast, then we handed out the rest of the gifts one at a time, pretending to be interested in what anyone else received. Michael just dove in, ripping all the wrapping off in, frankly, an unseemly frenzy.

I had sweet potatoes. He had mashed.

I had Christmas crackers and wore the stupid paper hats that grew more and more wretched as dinner progressed until they split and slipped over one eye, so everyone looked like the civil war wounded. He did not.

He ate at 7 in the evening. My Christmas dinner was more a lunch.

You'd think two adults could work this out. You'd be wrong.

Then we moved from Montreal to the country. We were tired of the city and yearned to make a life together in a place where neither of us had roots. We knew no one in the Eastern Townships.

What we did know, from visits to marvellous country inns like Manoir Hovey, was that the townships were filled with rolling hills and rivers and lakes. And small villages where English and French lived together easily and happily. Where bistros served café au lait and croissants, steak frites and yes, even poutine.

But while we knew and loved it as visitors, it was quite different to actually live there. We had no traditions, no routines, no expectations. No family. No friends. No support system. No clue.

Dear Lord, what were we thinking?

It was thrilling and unexpectedly frightening. Like setting ourselves adrift only to realize, too late, why safe

harbours are so popular.

That first Christmas was just us. We discussed possibly going to a [hotel](#). Maybe a resort in Mexico. Going away. Running away.

But we decided to give a country Christmas a try. And, if we were going to do it, it might as well be with abandon – Australian-rules Christmas. Therefore, if one Christmas tree was good, two were better. We put one in the kitchen, the other in the living room. With King's College Cambridge singing carols, we poured eggnog and decorated with ornaments from my late mother, decorations I hadn't seen in years. Then we walked around and around the living room, Michael holding a small box, and finally settled on a pine table by the fireplace. There he put out the handmade nativity scene his first wife, Sheilagh, loved.

We placed ornaments on the tree. Some had been gifts from friends, some my parents had collected when they were first married. Some small, stuffed, hand-stitched ones Michael's children had made. Each had a story.

As *Little Drummer Boy* played, I told Michael how my mother, never one to waste time, had assigned us each a favourite colour, a favourite meal and a favourite Christmas carol. My brother, Doug, was blue, roast beef and *Little Drummer Boy*, which he actually despised and I adored.

Michael told me about being a boy soprano and we laughed as he tried to hit the high notes again. Standing in front of the living-room tree, groaning with ridiculously mismatched ornaments, we each held a package of "icicles." The traditional finishing touch.

"You know," said Michael, staring at the pine, "it looks perfect the way it is."

"You know," I said, "you're right."

We put the unopened icicles back.

That Christmas Eve, we found a small Anglican chapel in a nearby village that had an evening service. There were feet of snow on the ground and more falling. Cars were parked up and down the plowed road and people walked arm-in-arm to the small, lit church, greeting each other. "*Joyeux Noël*."

We smiled and nodded to strangers. Inside, we sat on a wooden pew near the back. The chapel was decorated with holly and ivy and cheery red and white poinsettias. More and more people crowded in.

The music started. The tiny choir stood and started singing. We waited. And waited. And waited. Finally a nice man beside us smiled and explained that the Anglican priest actually had three churches he ministered to on Christmas Eve and was always running late. Especially when the weather was bad, as it was that night, with the snow growing heavier and heavier.

After a few carols, it was decided we might as well all sing. So we stood and for the next half-hour Michael, the boy soprano, and I sang carols with the rest of the congregation. I hadn't really sung carols since I was an "angel snowflake" in a church play as a child, when green, spare ribs and *Silent Night* were my assigned favourites.

"O come all ye faithful," we sang, "joyful and triumphant."

"*Il est né*," we sang, "*le divin Enfant*."

After the service, as we struggled into our parkas and tuques and mitts, the nice man beside us and his partner introduced themselves and invited us to a potluck dinner at their home that night. We had nothing to bring, we explained, though that must have been obvious.

"Just bring yourselves," Walter said.

So we did. And there, in front of their roaring fireplaces, we met all our neighbours. We ate *tourtière* and *fèves au lard* and *bourguignon* and *tartes au sucres*. We ate casseroles and salmon and Walter's famous duck pies. And *bûche de Noël*, the traditional Québécois Christmas log, made of cake, not wood.

Then we drove home, seeing the colourful Christmas lights bobbing outside our home through what had become a snowstorm.

Every Christmas now, we get together with our neighbours. We've often hosted a carol-singing evening in our home. In the village, a man drives his horse-drawn *calèche* for the children, who sit under old rugs and sip hot chocolate. Christmas carols play over tinny loudspeakers along *rue Principale*. There are concerts and readings of *A Christmas Carol*. There are tree-lighting ceremonies and bake sales.

We have found our safe harbour. But not in carols, not in decorations, not even in traditions. We found it in the Eastern Townships.

All is calm, all is bright. Perhaps my mother was right after all.

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Louise Penny's picks

WHERE TO STAY

Manoir Hovey and Auberge West Brome ([see details](#)). For a more intimate experience, our friend Pina Macku runs the bed and breakfast Pinorama – and will even take guests cross-country skiing through the woods. It's stunning. www.manoirhovey.com; www.awb.ca; 1-450-538-3063 or pinamacku@hotmail.com.

WHERE TO EAT

There is a wonderful bistro in Sutton called the Beaux Lieux (www.bistrobeauxlieux.com). And a tea room with great lunches and tea and scones called Café Tintoretto (450-538-2207). In Knowlton, we go to the Café Inn (450-243-0069), which is next to a fabulous independent bookstore called Brome Lake Books and Woolrich Clothing. Very wicked! Go in the evening to see the Christmas lights that stay up much of the winter.