

ONE

Pennick is on the way to somewhere else. People pass through and think it's as cute as it seems. They see the main street, which has a clutch of Olde buildings, and a few garish window boxes in summer. The purists say it's in Norfolk, and it probably is as it's flat enough, for one thing, but its position near the county lines of both Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire makes it susceptible to getting lost in the geography of the area. You know those romantic scenes in films where characters stand on a mountain and say, 'Look, you can see three counties from here,' and everything is wonderful? That's how it is somewhere else, not here. Occasionally, a rock star thinks he's discovered the last unspoiled bit of England and buys a crumbling pile down a meandering gravel lane, but then gets driven to more drink and drugs by sheer isolation of the place and the fact that he's trapped in it when it floods.

Pennick doesn't seem part of anything but its own ordinariness. Perhaps the geographical ambiguity is contagious and

Pauline McLynn

we natives are unsure who or what we are, or should be. We're pretty good at misery and feeling hard done by, if we have any sense at all. Mostly we're stoics, accepting what can't be altered. After all, this place was fashioned long before any of us got our hands on it and change comes slowly in these parts. I've lived here all my life and hate it as much as anyone has a right to. Which is also to say that I love it. Love has such a crooked logic that nothing about it should ever surprise us. And so Pennick is home to me and I'll defend it to the death, which action is unlikely to be required.

I work at the railway station, running the office. Most trains keep on keepin' on down the line and don't bother themselves with us or we with them, I guess you could say. To be honest, we're little more than a junction with lines going to far more interesting places. A few services have to stop, for passengers to make other connections or some locals to return after unsuccessful attempts to escape.

I'm being harsh, I know, but I'm allowed. Pennick's my hometown. This is like having a go at family: it's expected, par for the course. And if I truly hated it, I'd've left it long ago. Or at least I assume I would. That sort of thinking – conjecture, Mum would have called it – is useless anyway. The what-ifs. I'm going nowhere. I deal in reality these days and it's not very pretty most of the time.

I'm waiting for my holiday cover to arrive so that I can show her the ropes of the station office. I take the fallow time to review the items on my special shelves. Aside from a whole

Missing You Already

section at the back of the office devoted to forgotten umbrellas, I've got a walking stick, three pairs of spectacles (one with prescription sun lenses), a lunchbox (which I have relieved of its banana sandwich and juice carton), a jolly-looking turquoise windcheater, and a Busy Lizzie plant up front. It's not bad, only seven items. Sometimes the shelves groan under the forgotten and misplaced pieces of other people's lives. There isn't a peak season for being lost or found, except in the case of umbrellas, or at least if there is, I haven't spotted one. It's a constant, but sometimes there's a little more lost in the world. I like to help things be found.

People forget things every day. They miss their stop. They leave an extra bag on the train seat or resting by them on the station platform bench. Travelling is stressful, although this doesn't fully explain the way some of the townspeople's bits and bobs keep turning up here. Pennick is big enough for a police station but not a Marks and Spencer. People here dislike the criminal taint of handing in an article to the cops, as if they might be suspected of coming into it illegally or through some other unsavoury activity. So impromptu Lost Property departments are springing up everywhere. I know Longley's the newsagent's has one, for instance, ditto Springfield Medical Centre and the Frog and Firkin, though the latter usually re-homes items promptly when its customers sober up. I think they once put a hen up for a weekend because the farmer thought it had flown away. He recognised it when he came

Pauline McLynn

back the following Monday, complaining about how you couldn't get faithful stock any more.

The Springfield gets a surprising number of medical aids left behind, things that are designed to help people cope and perhaps were even what they came in for in the first place. You have to wonder if we aren't a hell of a lot more adaptable than we think, us humans, and just prone to cosseting ourselves needlessly a lot of the time. That said, they found a false leg in the car park once which was very quickly reclaimed, I hear. Happy reunions are what we aim for, at best. At worst, it's a shelf-ful of knick-knacks, trapping dust and taunting me with unfulfilled promise.

The station did once have a formal Lost Property office, in the far-off glory days of rail travel, when rail workers had recognisable uniforms and there were porters on the platforms wearing peaked hats. With time, and the erosion of old travelling decencies, the staff was streamlined as were the posts. Lost Property and Left Luggage merged then disappeared, to be replaced only by a general remit to look after those who pass through our hands here each day.

Dan is the Station Master and I have known him since I was a kid. He was at the root of me coming to work here. I was drifting at the time. He didn't need a nine-to-fiver just then but somehow he wangled the budget for it and here I am. He deals with the upkeep of the station, with ushering on the local departures, and keeps things in order for the many trains that simply whizz past without a by-your-leave.

Missing You Already

I look after the administrative side: ticket sales, paperwork, phone enquiries and lost property.

We're not the only staff here. Nights are looked after by Benny, who likes the dark and dislikes people so the shift is perfect for him: his dream job. He charts the ghostly goods trains travelling in the down time, some carrying succour to supermarkets, some full of other poisons, the waste shunted from place to place as if to keep it moving will somehow make it invisible or matter less. There's a small band of contract cleaners who come in daily to keep the place as spruce as it can ever look. Sometimes they find used hypodermics in the loos, proof that we're as poisoned a backwater as anywhere else. And then there's Roly, the biggest cat I have ever encountered. He strolled in some years ago, decided he liked the set-up and stayed. He's the ratter and mouser and keeps to his own schedule. In more inclement weather, he'll choose a spot in my office and snooze; mostly he prefers the sheds out by the sidings. He delivers gifts for the pantry as thanks for the shop-bought and homemade cat food he gets in the office. I have become used to encountering dead rats on the doorstep, though not quite inured to it, and must praise him if he's still around when I see them. He's big on manners like that.

The railway has played a major part in my life. As kids we took the train to school in Fetchley, twelve minutes up the line. 'We' was Daniel, Donna and I: the Three Amigos, Three Musketeers. There were other neighbourhood

Pauline McLynn

children, friends even, but they were peripheral to us. We three might as well have been siblings. As it is, I am the lone only-child of our posse but, even though the others had some each, we meant more to one another than any brother or sister. We took one another for granted, and we took the railway for granted too. We needed it, it was there, we used it, attaching no great importance to it at the time. But it ran in our blood all the same.

Donna and I went to the Benedictine Girls' School and Daniel attended Farnworth College. They were within spitting distance of one another, a fact that the boys were keen on proving regularly during term-time. Richard Crabtree once got Sister Hilda's habit by accident as she floated through the playground. She was away with her many saints and never noticed the creamy gob on her long, black skirt. It was disgusting but it set a new standard and thereafter to hit a nun without being caught was all any Farnworth boy longed for. It was only a shame that Punk was long dead by then. We could have put Norfolk on the map.

The schoolkids still travel by train. It's the part of the day I like most: the jostling, the energy, the hope. I miss that during the holidays, though lots of the kids are still around and get out of town to the sea as much as possible, to escape the drear flatline of Pennick. That goes for winter as well as summer. Some aim for glory and get as far as Norwich before being recalled. It gives them a taste, though, and if they're lucky they'll get out altogether and go to college.

Missing You Already

I didn't. For some reason, I wasn't cut out for it. It's strange to some because I am the product of two academically bright people but have none of that sort of mental alacrity. It's not something I've ever lost sleep over. I didn't care enough about it then, and I still don't. Anyhow, I see similar things in other lives. There are kids out there born to plain-looking parents who inherit some rogue beauty gene and are blessed with movie-star looks. Equally I have seen the ultra-plain kids of beautiful parents, children who display the worst of both parents' features. Those are the genetic breaks and not scoring brains was mine.

My name is Kitty Fulton.

Margo slumped on the uncomfortable chair listening to Kitty explain the workings of the office. She was not particularly interested but this job was only temporary and she needed the money. She might have shifted to a more viable pose, probably should have, but couldn't get the will together for that. She studied her nails instead, wondering what colour to choose next. There was a silence and she realised that she was required to answer something, or perhaps comment on what had gone before. Kitty was smiling which looked vaguely condescending to Margo but she didn't want to get kicked out in spite of the fact that her uncle was the one in charge and had said she could fill in while Kitty was on her holiday, so that was a done deal as far as Margo was concerned. She rearranged her eyebrows to acknowledge that she was still paying attention.

Pauline McLynn

‘So, do they break off when you type?’ Kitty asked, referring to her bright pink false nails.

‘Nah.’

If Kitty expected more she didn’t get it. Margo had no wish to be drawn out by an old person. I’m only in my thirties, Kitty wanted to shout, knowing that any such explanation would appear irredeemably uncool. ‘Any questions?’

‘Will this be cash?’

‘That’s for your uncle to say.’

Margo grunted.

‘Is that all?’

Did Margo detect an edge there? Was she supposed to have some hugely intelligent question to ask about the drudgery that went on here? She felt she’d better ask something, to keep the older woman happy.

‘What’s with the Muster Point signs?’

Kitty frowned. ‘I think they’re self-explanatory, surely?’

The girl’s mouth took a down-turn as if she had smelled a bad odour. ‘Yeah?’

‘Dan saw one somewhere and decided he liked the sound of it.’

Margo shook her head in sadness and pity.

‘The lost art of mustering,’ Kitty said. ‘It amuses him.’

A vision of her Uncle Dan grinning at something so lame had Margo shivering. ‘State-of-the-art weird,’ she declared.

Margo’s gaze shifted to the station concourse, which she had been half keeping watch over through the main window

Missing You Already

of the small office. Fred Rowland and his mates were kicking an empty can around and waiting for the 16.08 to Fetchley-on-Sea. Kitty followed the direction of the girl's eyes. She saw a greasy gang of jobs who couldn't help making twits of themselves.

'He's quite attractive,' she conceded, in the face of Margo's pained and adoring expression.

'Yeah, well,' came the reply, which marked an end to their conversation, apparently.

Kitty walked the familiar route home along a stretch of railway line and in through the allotments. Her own plot was here, close to Dan's. She always stopped to check on it, however cursory this might be. Today, tiny spiders floated from the trees on gossamer threads. They were supposed to represent money or a windfall and, whereas that was always handy, there were a lot of things money simply could not buy for Kitty any more. The sky still showed some daytime blue. Soon, an extra hour would be given for a longer night's sleep and they would be plunged into months of darkness that the stolen hour could never make up for. The air was crisp with the promise of the first frost and all around allotment owners were harvesting. Shivering, Kitty pulled her cardigan close about her. Her mother had knitted it a decade before and it was always a comfort to wear. She regarded it as a shield, sometimes, its elaborate Fair Isle pattern dated but resonant and, above all, safe. It stood for something.

Pauline McLynn

It meant the past, and there were times now when Kitty felt that was all she had.

Her allotment neighbour, Jed, was attending to a patch of his beloved onions. He was of another century in outlook as well as language, his Broad Norfolk scattered with words and phrases little used in the modern parlance. Kitty asked how he was and he gave her his usual 'fair ter middlin'. Jed could tell the weather from a sniff of the wind. And sometimes he'd declare it, with no less accuracy, according to how his cats faced the window or fire or a bowl of milk.

'Nip in thet air,' he told her. 'Frost's com'n, dew yew arst me.' He was wearing his fingerless gloves in preparation for the cold. Even through the wool Kitty saw the carbuncular swellings of his arthritis. His long-dead wife had knitted those mitts, as he often reminded her. They were both held together, Jed and Kitty, through the medium of craft, she thought. Jed wore a shop-bought, woollen hat but it stopped short on his head and his ears were livid with the chill. She wondered if he would wear a pair of ear-muffs if she got him some. She'd need an occasion, like his birthday or Christmas.

His bushy grey eyebrows met. 'Yer rum friend was 'ere, gorp in at yer shud.' He nodded a few times. 'There's suff in savage 'bout that 'un.'

She didn't need to think hard to know whom he was talking about. 'You mean Donna?'

'Crockin' then she were.'

Missing You Already

Crying? This was not good.

‘Ollust be cairf’l thair,’ he advised, nodding as if he had seen it all before. He probably had. She wouldn’t have been surprised to discover that Jed was three hundred years old. Kitty thought, He’s warning me.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I appreciate that.’

He shrugged. ‘Jest wantet ter tell yew.’ He turned away. ‘I shall hatter keep a’ dewin here. No time for mardlin.’

My journey home takes me past the graveyards, old and new. A fresh plot is gaping, ready to take the latest inhabitant allocated it from the town. It’s probably someone I know. Pennick is small enough for everyone at least to have heard mention of the names of the other people who live here.

I think back to my conversation with Jed and remember how Dan adopted the old man’s pronunciation of Pennick when we were young. He’d declare that we lived in a town called Panic. It always seemed ludicrously funny that such a sleepy place would ever sound so racy.

I hear Mum’s voice as I come through the door. It’s good to know she’s home and safe. She threw a cup of hot tea at me this morning. She missed, but that’s hardly the point. Perhaps I annoyed her into flinging the cup but I doubt it. Even so, it’s the thin end of some wedge and will have to be discouraged. She is practising her words. Mr Bishop wants her to do Bs on her next visit and she’ll have a head start if she thinks of beginning with his name. He assigns the letter

Pauline McLynn

at random so that we can never second guess what he'll choose next. My theory is that she practises a lot in the hope that more than she'd be expected to remember might become lodged in her head and have to come out if she wills it. She is still an incredibly determined woman. Happily, she won't have to make sentences using only these words. That would be a call too far.

'Bound. Bale. Bland.'

These are all good. She is having a good day. She is beaming when I enter the kitchen. I must tell her that: Beaming.

'Beauty,' she says, looking me in the eye and I choose to believe it is deliberate, a gift to me. (Believe, another B – it's an expressive letter, this.)

'Billy.' She pauses. It's a name but at least follows the B rule. She runs Backer and Bike together and it makes her smile. I think there's a story attached but, if there is, she doesn't share it. 'Bite. Bored. Bla . . . bla . . . bla . . . ' she's getting stuck ' . . . black.' It's a B and fully formed, so well done. I add 'sheep' quickly to make a joke and ease over her hesitation, and we laugh although it's not that funny. We have to keep things light and happy. There is no room here for Bleak or its cousins. They will join us in time. But not yet.

But. That's a handy one. It keeps a situation current, ongoing. There is still some wriggle room with a But. It's an invitation for more of whatever you need to get by. By and Getting are what we are about now.

Missing You Already

I see the shopping basket in the kitchen and I know she has done her chore for the day. The list is still inside and each item is ticked off. I begin to check them myself, casually so she won't notice, looking in the cupboards to see that they are put away properly. Although the list said cucumber she has bought a courgette, but never mind: it's an easy mistake to make. I flick the switch on the kettle and ask Mum if she'd like some tea. She looks puzzled. 'I think I've had some,' she says, and consults her notebook. 'Yes,' she confirms. 'Says here I enjoyed it too.'

'Good. Would you like some more?'

'Maybe not, dear. In case I didn't go to the loo last time.'

She is careful not to give her body any further chance to betray her.

I check the main diary and see that Hannah, a neighbour, has been in and has written that all was well today. Mum had a sandwich for lunch, then went on an outing with her support group to paint landscapes. I don't see any evidence of that but I'll ask in a while. I open the fridge door to get the milk and notice the hairdryer on the bottom shelf. When I look back I see Mum about to pour tea into an upside-down mug, knowing there is something wrong in this picture but wondering what it is. I rush to take the pot from her before she scalds herself. She will be sixty years old next January.

Our house, number 15, The Cottages, is small, unremarkable, red brick, in a terrace of many others. Evidence of the

Pauline McLynn

way we live is everywhere. The Post-its on the wall by the front door remind us about our keys. In this regard I am as bad as Mum for forgetting so I'll share responsibility for those. The Post-its are also all over the back of the door should any distraction occur between picking the keys up and heading out. Again, those could be meant for me. The hall table has little areas marked out for keys, umbrellas, gloves; if there's a gap, it means the system isn't being adhered to. Important numbers are clearly displayed by the telephone. We used to have a portable handset but it kept getting misplaced so we're back to the traditional one attached to the cradle now.

A visitor might take in the sheer volume of thrillers and detective books on our many sets of shelves. Pieces of, largely abandoned, knitting spill from some bags on the floor, none terribly coherent in pattern but the colours are vivid and welcoming. I am forever threatening to feng shui the lot, more because I realise that clutter presents hazards for Mum than from any inclination to find money corners to leave free or to keep invisible energies flowing throughout the space. I suppose it's all a lot of old cobblers, especially to people like ourselves with huger issues to deal with. It's not a streamlined or neat house, then, but neither is it in total chaos, which is a minor wonder given that we're not always up to keeping it in order. There is a constant soundtrack, of radio or television or stereo, especially during daytime hours. I try to keep it to a gentle level so that if Mum found herself at

Missing You Already

some sort of disadvantage, she wouldn't be further confused by the noise.

My mother May is a sprightly Irishwoman with naturally dark hair and blue eyes. A Celt, she would say, if she remembered to claim it. I am dark also but hazel eyed. We're both of medium height and have no remarkable distinguishing features that I am aware of. You would pass us on the street and not take a second glance, I think.

The garden out back is testament to Mum's green fingers. She began it many years ago. It's a riot of colour in summer and a symphony of structure in winter. 'Plant well,' she told me, 'and the garden does the work for you.' In the late-September light, thistle tops stand ready to catch snow and frost, shrubs have been clipped to add pleasing shapes and a small rowan tree holds red berries to cheer the birds along.

Whenever we are at home the door is kept on the latch and neighbours come and go regularly. They always have, but make sure to now. Spare sets of keys reside in about ten houses around 15, The Cottages so there is never a problem with anyone gaining entry should they need to.

At face value the picture is one of ruffled domestic harmony, and often that's true of the little house. It might even look regular or humdrum but for the Post-its. Some are rectangular yellow, some square and blue, and some recent pink additions are heart-shaped. On the day Mum took a marker to the plasterwork to write herself a reminder,

Pauline McLynn

I was forced to admit that the writing was now well and truly on the wall.

It was Dad who first noticed that something was wrong. My father, Stephen Duke, is the publisher of a small imprint that specialises in academic tomes and collections of poetry. That's how he and Mum met and became involved. She worked as a copy editor for him. Words have always been her thing, which makes this new situation doubly tragic for her. He sought me out one day about eight years ago to ask if she was having her menopause. I asked why, wondering if this was going to be one of his occasional mini-rants about how they should never have hooked up and that I was the only good thing to come of the union, to be followed swiftly by a denial that there was only one good thing, though I was assuredly the best thing, and that they simply exasperated one another and not to mind him letting off steam. But this time it was a lot less and, in fact, a lot more.

'It's just that it looks as though she's edited that last book I gave her with a knife and fork,' he explained.

I didn't think much of the remark for a time. They often had artistic differences. I was pretty sure it was not the menopause, that was past. Unless it could make a return, like a hormonal grace note? I asked around and that didn't seem likely. But Dad was right that she did seem more distracted than usual. A tad forgetful. She would have to search for the appropriate word, sure, though actually I didn't

Missing You Already

find that bit at all odd. She liked to be precise. As I've said, words were her thing.

'I can't find the whatchoocallit,' she said one day, her accent more Irish-sounding than usual. When you've lived away from the country of your birth for a long time it gets less pronounced, I think. Now her lilt was emphasised. So I noticed that. And then she began to cry. 'I can't seem to find it.' She was desperately upset, a lot more than she should have been. After all, what could be so important that it would drive her to tears? Later, I realised that it was the *word*, not the *thing*, she couldn't locate and that, for her, was an awful admission. She was frightened by it. We've been frightened by bigger things since, but on that day it was the worst thing that had happened to her in a long time and not, as I finally began to suspect, an isolated incident.

Mum was never the kind to panic easily so she was obdurately against supposing this was, actually, anything but a hormonal surge or a symptom of creeping stress. She had always been a bit scatty about domestic details – bills to be paid (until she set up direct debits), keys, her purse, the usual stuff. We muddled along.

Then Mum began to bulk up. She had always been a trim woman who took care of her appearance. Now she was inclined to leave a skirt zip undone for comfort. I thought nothing of it at first, putting it down to the hormonal imbalance she insisted was at the heart of her problems. There did seem to be a lot more food in the house, and a lot more

Pauline McLynn

going to waste for that matter. I found abandoned halves of sandwiches and baguettes by the many paperbacks she liked to read. I would tip them into the bin without comment. Then Mum would ask where her lunch had disappeared to. It could be ten in the evening by then. I found receipts for the supermarket; my mother was clearly going once or twice a day. These featured chocolate that never entered the house, along with crisps, sweets, popcorn. No wonder she was packing on the pounds.

‘Are you putting on a bit of weight?’ I ventured one evening, but there was no tone that could take the sting off that remark for a lady who was conscious of how she looked and I almost held my breath, waiting for the answer.

Mum’s eyes narrowed. ‘What if I am?’

‘Well, I guess, no reason, except that it’s hard to shift it once it goes on and it’s bad for your health anyhow.’

‘I can’t help it if I’m hungry a lot.’

‘No.’ I didn’t know where to go from here. ‘Are you hungry now?’ I asked.

I saw my mother check the clock. It read 9.15. We had eaten our evening meal over an hour before. I noticed her do some calculations and answer, ‘Of course not,’ adding, after a pause, ‘it’s eight o’clock,’ for good measure. It was then that I knew two things: one, that Mum didn’t remember eating and, two, that she was hiding a lot more from me. The idea that my mother was lying to me on a regular basis made my heart shift in my chest. She’d never lied to me,

Missing You Already

aside from about Santa Claus (which was no big deal when the truth emerged as the gifts kept coming) and saying that Granny had gone to heaven. I had been taken 'home' to Ireland to meet Granny on a few occasions and, young as I was, even I knew that the malevolent old crone would be welcome in no god's hereafter. Now my mum was applying subterfuge to exclude me. My guts wrenched.

'We didn't have pudding,' she said. Her voice was high with a mixture of longing and providing an excuse for wanting more, or anything at all. It was also wily, a new nuance to her speech.

We rarely ate dessert at home. It was time to act.

I think life gives us time to digest news, particularly when it's bad. And the medical profession is no different. It has to be like that, otherwise hospitals and surgeries would sink under the weight of tears and anguish and no one would be cured, least of all the curable. We have to be given a chance to digest the facts, as far as they can be known. Even death at close quarters slows down our perception so we can get past the first awful fact and prepare ourselves for the grief that we can see approaching, in slow motion but on its way nonetheless.

So it was when it came to my mother's diagnosis. We were drip-fed facts, such as they were and are. Even so, there is no absolutely certain way that her condition can be called what we all feel it is. A slew of tests relegated other

Pauline McLynn

dementias. When she's dead they may take a slice of her brain and examine it and say, 'Yes, May Fulton had Alzheimer's Disease,' though we all know that to be probable right now. However, only her poor addled mind can give the definitive proof and it's too invasive to do that while she's still alive. She is young to be affected, as mostly it's an increasingly elderly population who present with it. I've heard it called Old Timers a lot. But it's not a discriminating disease and will take whomever it pleases, just to show it can, I sometimes believe.

Trying to convince her to see a doctor in the first place was arguably the hardest part. She did seem perfectly hale, other than being mithered. In fact, with the weight she'd gained, she looked to be blooming. She argued and prevaricated but eventually gave in. We had to know, to act, and I'm so glad we did as I think it has bought us extra time. There is nothing so satisfying as snatching back years that the disease might have denied us.

Mum's mind is tangled. Bit by bit, proteins made by her own system are strangling her brain and killing it. All of her physical abilities in general are being impaired to some degree, hijacked by this sneaking disease. We've had the best of the early medication and that returned her to near normality for a long time. We almost felt we were beating the thing for a while, which was cocky and inaccurate. What the drugs did was work on the symptoms not the disease itself, boosting the brain's supply of neurotransmitters while

Missing You Already

unable to rid her of the underlying damage. I hear of kids stealing the stuff to take before exams so that they'll enhance their brain capacity. It's a mad but strangely practical thing to do, I guess, and no real surprise.

After all, people are injecting botox, a bona-fide poison, into themselves to erase their frown lines. That came from someone noticing there was a lucrative side-effect in the medical response to a debilitating condition. I'll bet there's some boffin in the laboratory of a large cosmetics firm right now trying to find the right ratio of flesh-eating disease to cream so that we can smear ourselves with something that will deal with cellulite. It's all a matter of degree.

As for Alzheimer's sufferers, there's always the hope of a general cure in the long term. Though not for us, as it happens. Mum is too far gone for that. But we make the most of what we have. And it's a good most.

Mostly.