So You Think You Can Change: Life Lessons from Pat

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During the most difficult season of my life, I found solace in Maud's work. Pat Gardiner's obsession with Silver Bush and fear of change perfectly parallel the way I felt. In journeying with her, I discovered that home is located in any time and place where love is welcome.

It's interesting how I'm drawn more to non-fiction these days than I am to novels. I think it's because I long to feel grounded, and facts are more grounding than fairy tales. My whimsy is bound to return to me as my foundation grows more solid and new roots take hold, but right now, I find myself reading medical books for fun.

When it comes to the work of L.M. Montgomery, however, I make an exception. I will read her fiction no matter what life brings.

This is how I wound up meeting Pat Gardiner last month.

Pat and I did not click quite so quickly as I had hoped. She is one of Maud's youngest protagonists, and I was worried I had already outgrown her.

Seriously, how am I still doing this? Maud never lets me down.

Watching Pat grow up over the course of *Silver Bush* is an odd experience. She ages eleven years in body and many more in soul. But in her heart of hearts, she clings to what she knows—her family, her friends, and most of all, her home.

I feel for this girl.

I *was* this girl.

Maybe I still am.

When I was in high school, one of my friends broke down during our Tuesday-morning ballet class because her older sister had just moved out. I remember giving her a hug and feeling lucky that I would never experience what she was feeling. I'm the oldest of three, and I had no plans of moving away from my brothers. Someday, of course, but that was for Grown-Up Aquinnah to deal with. What a relief!

It wasn't until recently that I realized Grown-Up Aquinnah and I are now one. I don't know when it happened or how I missed it—*if* I missed it—but here I am, and here she is, and my siblings are about to live on the other side of the country.

Reading how Pat clings to Sid, her youngest brother, feels no different than being in my own body these days. Uncomfortable and unsure and resigned. She knows Sid will want to marry a PEI girl and take over the family farm, just as I know my brothers' lives and career choices can't warp to accommodate mine. And they shouldn't. We're different people. But knowing that doesn't make it easier.

No amount of missing her will keep my best friend from moving to Boston after her wedding in June. I know this, and, still, I feel the weight of a dramatic life change. We have been friends for over a decade. I met her just after leaving Massachusetts myself. The irony is not lost on me.

What a waste of energy, trying to halt the winds of change. But I think it's reflexive.

Of all the things Pat tries to control, her place at Silver Bush is of utmost importance. That's why she can't bear to see Sid married. If he brings a wife into the picture, Pat will have to leave, and the only dream she's ever had is of keeping house. But not just any house—her *home*.

(I talk about home *a lot*.)

I concluded last month in one of my ramblings that home is ultimately within. It took me a minute, but I firmly believe this to be true. Wherever you go, there you are, and if that's not acceptable, nothing else will be either.

But a *home*! A physical, tangible, four-walls-and-a-toasty-warm-bed *home*. All my life, I have longed for the unwavering stability of knowing that "where I hang my hat" is where I will stay—at least for a good long while.

I have moved, on average, once a year since I was a child. Not once have I had to struggle to make myself comfortable in a house. Maybe I was an interior designer in another life. But in this one, I'm a woman who puts down roots wherever she can. It's a trait that makes it difficult to leave a place but easy to adjust to a new one.

Pat, on the other hand, has lived at Silver Bush forever. She knows nothing but the charming old kitchen and the Poet's room and Judy's hooked rugs. Not only does she not want to leave—she can't even imagine it.

I think Pat gets a bad rap because she isn't clever like Anne or fierce like Emily … or particularly endowed with any unique characteristics whatsoever. She's simply obsessed with Silver Bush to the point of being in a constant state of anxiety over the slightest hint of change. Despite my moving history, the familiarity of this feeling is a little gross.

But I don't think Pat deserves the hate she receives. Hers is a cautionary tale, one that applies to all of us. "Here is what happens when you refuse to let go of what is no longer serving you." Maud herself said that she resonated more with Pat than with any of her other heroines (MacLeod 27).

Pat knows Silver Bush is not the same without Bets, Jingle, and the veil of childhood. She knows—a bit like Jo March—that she's lonely. All she has to do is admit it to herself and be set free.

The best part about this two-book series—with the possible exception of Judy—is Hilary "Jingle" Gordon.

He lacks Gilbert's confidence and Teddy's flair but more than makes up for both with his kindness and patience.

My favourite thing about Jingle is how determined he is to build Pat a house that she loves even more than Silver Bush. When she explains why he'll never succeed, he just smiles and goes on imagining their life together. Even as a child, Jingle understands the power of keeping faith (a running theme with Maud).

And what a parallel to the love of the Universe! The kind of love that stops at nothing to reach us exactly where we are. "You can have it all," it squeals, and we stubbornly reply, "Maybe, but all I want is this," hard-pressed to realize we've outgrown our four walls.

Even when her sister, Rae, moves to China, and her dear companion, Judy, passes away, Pat maintains that Silver Bush is all she needs to be happy. She breaks off her years-long engagement to a man she does not love and hunkers down for a life of solitude. Loneliness, when framed as a gift, isn't so bad … right? Maybe loneliness is freedom. Nothing can change if there is no one around to force it.

But that's not really true—is it?

In any case, it's not true for Pat, who finds in her loneliness that there are always variables outside of one's control. Her grouchy sister-in-law accidentally burns Silver Bush to the ground, sparing nothing but the front door and a few trinkets. Despite her best efforts, "symbolically speaking," Pat winds up back on the Base Line road, where she once got lost as a child. That fateful night, she did not walk herself home to Silver Bush. Hilary did.

And in the same way, when her carefully laid plans crumble around her, Hilary is there, loving her, as he has always loved her. He has held her tenderly, yet loosely, never once asking her to leave her home. His love for her inspires his career path, his travels, his studies. He knows nothing may ever come of it, but loving her is, in his words, "the best thing" (Montgomery, *MP* 337).

So, the one truth that has never changed for Hilary becomes the one factor that changes everything for Pat. He has built her a house wherein lies each precious gift ever given to him by her family. And for the first time ever, she tastes true freedom and is glad.

Love over fear.

Love over fear.

With Maud, the message is always love over fear.

Love for yourself, for others, for the smallest moments in your life. Maybe this, too, is where home is located: in any time and place where love is welcome. Not the kind that harbours and clings and worries and smothers, but the kind that opens and keeps faith.

Bio: Aquinnah Bree moved across the United States three times before she turned twelve, an experience that taught her the value of feeling at home. She now resides 6,000 feet above sea level. Besides writing, she enjoys walking in the sunshine, making music, practising yoga, and trying new soup recipes. She is the author of *A Tempest of Roses*.

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