

“At Home In Wenham: Glimpses Of The Perfect...And Not So Perfect” by Carrie Jelsma

September, 2006

A month ago, shortly after we moved to Wenham from St. Thomas, my husband was unexpectedly hospitalized needing emergency surgery. Yesterday, after a power surge caused a black out in our new house, my two young children and I dragged our mattresses into the sunroom so we can escape in case of a fire. Even though National Grid restored our power, they're worried about potential fire hazards until they determine the cause of the surge. I'm not moving out because I'm due to give birth to our third child any day. I figure we can jump out of the sunroom windows or doors easily enough if the place torches. Most of our belongings haven't arrived yet from St. Thomas so that'd all be spared too, in case of a fire. It's a bit much, but we're fine and my husband will be OK and home soon. That's what I'm telling myself and it's helping.

Amidst this trying transition, the doorbell rings. It's the neighbors—multiple neighbor ladies. They're armed with prepared meals, drills and screw drivers, warm smiles, funny jokes, and alcohol for those who aren't currently “prego.” They unpack boxes, hang pictures, move furniture, play with our kids, give us and set up a portable crib, then come back again with some size 8 kicky fall black boots. I arrived with plenty of beachy flip flops, but no kicky fall black boots—which I learned is a New England woman's fall wardrobe must-have. I exhale a little deeper this day, even though I didn't think I had any more room in my diaphragm.

October, 2006

I arrived home last night after giving birth to our third child at Beverly Hospital. I'm simultaneously exhausted and elated. My husband and other children are out forging their new lives at work and school. While getting to know my new love, I'm painfully unsettled amidst the remaining unpacked boxes, organized chaos of a recent move, and mounds of baby gear. My son and I don our fall coats and venture into the neighborhood. I purposefully--and gingerly--push the stroller down the hill away from the house. I'm looking for the neighbors who'd said they may be around. Kelly drives by and exclaims "What're you doing out?! You're back from having the baby?" I reply "Yeah...this is him!" Kelly smirks. "Well you SHOULD be home resting but follow me. Some of us are down the street." While I sipped coffee amidst a cacophony of "Ooos", "Awwwws" "How'd It go?" and "What's His Name?", my unsettled feeling subsides as seeds of home are further planted.

December, 2008

It's blustery. I have multiple large packages and three wiggly kids to get unpacked from the van on Main Street and into the post office on December 21st – about the last day to mail gifts so they'll arrive in time for Christmas, a.k.a. the busiest day at the post office at a frantic time of year. Yes! I get a parking spot right in front! After wrangling our seven-, five- and two-year old into the lobby and imploring them to "stay right there where I can see you" and "not run into the street", I wrestle the unwieldy boxes into the

lobby next to my gaggle of kids. Dang! The five-year old makes a run for the door. I snag him before he gets outside. As I let out a bedraggled, irritated sigh, I feel a soft touch on my forearm. I peer through the ponytail escapees that hang in my face. An elderly woman says to me kindly, empathetically, “It IS a lot now. Remember, it’s also glorious and try to enjoy it. I’ll be alone this holiday.” She’s bleary-eyed from the wind gusting in as my five-year old is pulling open the door again, but she sees more clearly than I do. I continue to feel that soft touch on my forearm as a friendly reframe, long after that holiday season has passed.

June, 2010

My friend is from Central America and she moved from the West Coast to Massachusetts recently with her husband and sons. Wanting to pay some Wenham hospitality forward and welcome them to Massachusetts, we invite them over for some casual fun about town, a cookout, and lots of catching up around the firepit. While we’re at the Wenham Teahouse playground, one of my friend’s sons needs a bathroom urgently! I send them both to a local retail shop because it’s quicker to get to than our home. It’s where we go to the bathroom in a pinch.

About 15 minutes later they return. My friend walks toward me while her son resumes playing with the other kids. I joke, “Either you guys are super efficient, didn’t make it in time, or couldn’t find it!” My friend asks to go back to our home to use the restroom. I offer “If you can watch the other kids, I’m happy to take him to the closer bathroom. No

problem.” She quietly, uncomfortably again asks to return to our home. “We were told to leave because they said we didn’t belong there.”

April, 2013

I’m going to run 5k races again. I’m going to start with Melody Miles, followed by Gabe’s Run, and I’m going to train on the Danvers Rail Trail—it’s close, nice, flat, I like the crunch of the gravel under my ASICS, and the boardwalk feels like a hug from mother nature. I’m sucking wind hard at the 3k mark and am ready to stop. A powerhouse of a human runs toward me. She pumps her fist as she passes me. “Keep it up!” I jog another kilometer.

December, 2013

The Miles River Middle School (MRMS) students are sitting in a classroom at some other middle school – Shore Country Day, I think. After all the years of extracurriculars, the myriad schools are kind of a blur, but this moment’s in focus. It’s the Massachusetts Educational Theater Guild Drama Fest regional competition and MRMS is preparing to rock it.

The middle schoolers wrote an original script about dementia entitled “Forget The Rest”. They cast, blocked and act it out, largely on their own, but also under the tutelage and care of skilled, gifted and dedicated drama teachers. They would end up coming

home with awards, and even more important, a well-rounded, enriched depth of experience like none I'd seen in my middle school days.

But at this moment, I peer through the window of their designated classroom door, and see my daughter reading her personalized letter that the wonder-directors have written and delivered to each student prior to the show. She's full of emotion, pride, excitement, motivation, enthusiasm---she's firing on all cylinders and having the time of her life. It was a tough start to middle school for her last year, but at this moment, I realize all is well. Through the festival experience, and the drama teachers' supportive embrace and deft guidance, our daughter wrote a script and acted on a stage. It enabled her to resume writing her own script and acting on the stage of her own teenage life again.

June, 2013

The Wenham Canal is glass. It's dusk. My son's silhouette is luminous around the edges against the setting sun. He skips a stone across the water. An unexpected, exquisite moment.

September, 2015

“MOM!! I’m biking to Patton to play basketball and then going to get pizza. BYE!” The door slams. Bike tires grind against the gravel, which is a preferable way to describe our crumbling driveway. He’ll be back in a couple of hours tired and happy -- perhaps having gotten into mischief, perhaps not. I entrust him to the community’s friendly, firm guidance, if needed while he’s out and about, as others entrust their children to me.

November, 2015

I still aspire to run a 5k. This time I’m going to train on the Wenham Canal because it’s the Wenham Canal. After a few weeks and more than a few attempts, I make it to the 5.5k mark. I’m ready for Gabe’s Run, but my right foot is screaming in protest.

March, 2016

“What do you mean your brother’s in the shower? He’s right here!” And we all run down the hallway to find the toilet tank water supply tube spraying and spewing freezing water all over the bathroom. “Stop Snapchatting this and help out! Grab towels!! Stick your finger in this tube HARD! It’s a lot of water pressure.” “MOM!! Don’t wade around in there, you’ll get electrocuted!” “Really?! Oh No! Everyone out!!” And the apoplectic, water-spewing snake flails.

I was JUST in our basement last month AT the water main valve, but I can’t remember where it is. Water is pouring through the ceiling. Our basement and garage are flooded. I can’t think. I’m turning the valves to the baseboard heating system. I know these

aren't the right valves but I'll stand here and turn them until I think of something else to do. I know! I'll call 911!

Within minutes the fire department arrives. Within a few more after that, they've turned off the water, pumped most of it out of our basement and ensured we won't get electrocuted. Their support and expertise was amazing. On their way out, the Chief gives me a calm, assured smile, an encouraging pat on the shoulder, and I detect a hint of mischief when he says "If your neighbors ask why you didn't know where the water main valve was, they didn't hear it from me." Who'd of thought I'd finish this night feeling so calm....and laughing.

November, 2016

On this beautiful, crisp Thanksgiving morning, I grab an hour to walk the canal. I'm proactively addressing the pending feast with my in-laws in Maine by taking this 4-mile brisk walk, enjoying the sloppy dog kisses, and exchanges of "Hello", "Happy Thanksgiving" and friendly nods along the way. As a group of men jog by, they guffaw after one of them says to me "Why don't you go home and make dinner?"

September, 2017

“Thanks to everyone for coming to our first annual block party! The winner of the ‘best dish’ contest is Ben for his pulled pork.” I look around. There are 60-70 people in these three yards where we’re having the cookout. This is FUN! Next year I’m definitely going to bring out the big yard Bananagrams game. Oh wait...I did this year. Next year I’m definitely going to bribe some people to play it with me.

February, 2017

I’m sitting in my childhood home in Kentucky with family in the den. We’re a microcosm of the country, seemingly polarized by our current beliefs with some reckoning of long-term dynamics mixed in for fun. A tsunami of anger forms and crashes around inside of me. And for a second metaphor -- It feels like the rides I used to take on The Racer at Kings Island in Cincinnati—sitting backwards on a rickety wooden coaster, hanging on and banging around, never sure how it’d end. I’m not sure how this wild ride of anger will end, but it’s not lookin’ good.

Then I recall what I learned at the Center for Mindfulness and Insight Meditation (CMIM) – give your feelings time, give yourself time to observe and understand them. This, in turn, may allow you to thoughtfully respond, instead of immediately react fueled by unfiltered emotion. I took one 9-week class at CMIM and am hardly a mindfulness practitioner. In this moment, though, I remember and apply these lessons. The issues I reacted to with anger sitting in that den in Kentucky aren’t resolved; nor have they hijacked my emotions or relationships, thanks, in part, to what I learned at CMIM.

August, 2017

The canal is low enough that Judi and I can walk to the bridge and back on the right side. The sun shines – the glare hurts my eyes, but I welcome the penetrating warmth which feels restorative, yet any hotter would tip into discomfort. Judi prances, runs, darts after a grasshopper, prances again, then zooms into the reeds in the false hope she can catch a red-winged blackbird. Her burst sets off a cascade of flights—the geese, the herons, and all those other birds that I don't know what they are. This dog is so happy it's infectious. I should learn more about birds. I don't think I'm motivated enough to learn more about birds.

January, 2018

It's the second or fourth Tuesday of the month. Whether I'm walking into Honeycomb or Henderson's this week, I'm anticipating the warm embrace of Jen's ebullient grin and Mary's kind wisdom.

February, 2018

I'm not a runner. I'm definitely a walker, and I could start swimming. I'm going to check Gordon's pool schedule.

Written and Submitted by Carrie Jelsma

Note: Timeline rearranged and/or condensed for some scenes, and some names changed.