

I've seen what a good death looks like. I hope MAID's future looks the same

My mother-in-law ended her life on her own terms, as the woman we knew and loved. There need to be safeguards so that no one forces such choices on others

NOAH RICHLER

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The author's mother-in-law, Judy, smiles as she receives her afternoon glass of champagne, a ritual she continued in her final days.

NATHALIE MARSH

Noah Richler divides his time between Toronto and Sandy Cove, N.S. His most recent book is *The Candidate: Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*.

There's a cottage in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., that belonged to my mother-in-law, Judith MacLachlan. The white clapboard house, perhaps a century old, has a tumbledown fairy-tale quality. Overgrown vines hold the brick chimney in place, and the flowers and shrubbery of the small garden out front obscure, almost entirely, an airy veranda and its white wicker furniture. Inside is filled to bursting with books, vinyl records and art. There's a small piano against one wall, books on shelves and in cabinets and in piles on the floor, and the

surface of almost every table is crowded with family photographs. Paintings by [Peter Harris](#), the artist who, before his untimely death in 1993 at the age of 61, had been for a long time Judy's partner, dominate the walls. Vivid still lifes that are also effusive studies of a particular colour (orange, blue, purple). A portrait of a woman in a shawl looking head on. Another of a reclining nude no one needed Judy to confirm was her.

No houses line the opposite side of the quiet road, just an abundance of trees and vines concealing an old fence and beyond them the exquisite, mossy cemetery of St. Mark's Anglican Church. To the other side of the cottage, the land on which it sits falls away to the mouth of the Niagara River and Lake Ontario. From the glassed-in sun porch that is beginning to lean away from the back of the house, there is a splendid view over the tops of the region's enormous trees to Old Fort Niagara and, once a foe, America.



A light shines from the back porch of Judy's home in Niagara-on-the-Lake, on one of the final days when she welcomed family and friends.

Judy loved nothing more than to be home, which was for her several things: her family, of course, a daughter, Sarah, and a son, Rob, their spouses and children; the town, home to Upper Canada's first parliament and a heritage to which she was fiercely dedicated; and this enchanting house she loathed being away from too long. There are houses full of expensive things that are

testaments to their owners' aspirations more than their lives, and others, such as this one, which simply are a person. Every corner, every drawer, speaks to the lifetime of deliberate choices Judy made – as a teacher remembered with fondness and admiration by former students now well on in their own lives; as a divorcée, at a time when formal separation was rare and not easy to obtain; and as a student in her own right. For 15 years, Judy attended night classes before graduating, in her 40s, with a degree in Classics from Brock. From the time she was a teen, Judy told the children, “I want people to look at me and think, there goes an educated woman.”

The last of Judy's choices was for medical assistance in dying, which she underwent last October.

Canada's [MAID law](#) contains, for those who are eligible, safeguards to mitigate against uncertainty when the moment arrives or perhaps doubt about whether the decision is the patient's and not, say, the children's. A person's readiness must be assessed by two independent health professionals, and the more who are aware of the decision and the earlier they are, the easier is the process, which is why Judy had started hers several months before. Although MAID does not require that a person is suffering a terminal illness, Judy was. The multiple myeloma she'd been living with for almost a decade was worsening, and the drugs were losing their effect. She'd grown tired of the hours and hours of waiting in hospitals and doctors' offices for treatments she was no longer interested in and beginning to refuse. The original plan had been to put MAID off until her granddaughter Sophie, pregnant and living in England, could visit after Christmas with the family's first great-grandchild, or perhaps long enough to greet a second – her grandson, Andrew, and his wife Melissa were expecting in New York in March. But the decision was hastened when, in the way of seniors' lives, she'd fallen out of bed the month before reaching for the telephone. She'd broken her hip and, unable to rise from the floor, paramedics had rushed her out of the house she'd never wanted to leave and deposited her at the Niagara Falls ER where, true to form, she'd insisted she was in no pain and told the blushing doctor how handsome and well-dressed he was.

“What a lovely shirt,” said Judy, “you don't usually see that shade in a hospital.”

Beauty and not utility, the good and not the practical, were Judy's eternal verities. The doctor's shirt, a nurse's shoes or her oncologist's elegant dress; these were also a promise, steps to a better, finer and more enriching life of

which hospital rooms are the antithesis. They are chambers of function and purpose with no place for beauty, but perhaps for flowers quickly wilting if they are permitted at all. Judy hated being in hospital as, truth be told, are a burgeoning number. Who wants to live in a ward that is effectively a waiting room for the soon-to-be dead? Over the course of three weeks, Judy was moved from one room to the next, sharing the last of these with two other women. One, in her 90s, was no longer able to breathe unassisted. Lying on her side and slowly dying, she would emit the occasional groan and was forced to suffer the further indignity of having the curtain pulled around her bed because she'd tested positive for COVID-19, as if it mattered. The other kept her TV on too loud, from time to time wheeling herself out for a smoke as Judy would try to finish reading the newspapers we brought her, an obstinate attempt to feign normality in her modern-day oubliette.

At what point do we understand that a life is no longer worth conserving and what makes it so? Now, we learn, the right of the mentally ill to choose MAID will not be considered [until after the next election](#). We do not, apparently, have the right or sufficient data, though a cynic would conclude that our Liberal government understands the issue is contentious and is reckoning with votes, not arguments. Folk, say the act's detractors, may not be well enough to see that a remedy may work for them – keep them alive, if not happy; that this, the ultimate choice, should not be left to people who may not be of sound mind. Better housing, better hospitals, better welfare: all these might keep a person from choosing MAID, but none is available yet and rather than work on these other sides of the equation, we pretend that equivalent safeguards cannot be created and demand that the affected continue to suffer.

We have learned how to extend a life, but less so how to make it worth living.



Judy through the years: Visiting Paris with friend Sue Stewart in 1958, holding daughter Sarah Maclachlan in 1962 and smiling with long-time paramour Peter Harris in 1984. His paintings would continue to hang in her home long after his death in 1993. SUPPLIED BY FAMILY

That first week in the hospital had been eminently social, which Judy loved being. Sarah confided how she'd always thought that her mother, at home and seeing so few people, had been depressed as much as sick, though if she suggested as much her mother would say simply, "I don't do depression," which was of course her generation's stock answer. But now a stream of people was passing through and engaging her. A surgeon dropped by to tell her about the operation they were ready to perform and the six to eight days she would need before she would be able to start rehab and, at an appropriate moment, Sarah suggested that she could refuse the surgery if she wished. Judy looked at her first-born with a serious, pensive expression, was silent for a moment, and then said no, she would go ahead with the operation.

Suddenly, it appeared as if she might have changed her mind about MAID completely, this apparent turnaround corroborated after the operation when, wheeled back on a gurney from the surgery to the ward, Judy raised her arms and gleefully shouted to the new friends she'd made (it never took her long), "I'm back! I'm back!" But then she learned it would be a good six to eight weeks, not days, before she'd be able to put any weight on the leg and start rehab. The prospect of two months in hospital – of being supine for that long; of the likelihood of infection; of being unable to use the toilet without the assistance of two nurses; of never again being able to live in her house – was suddenly rendered monstrously apparent. She decided, instead, to hurry her death on. She wanted to be home, and MAID would allow it.

She made her decision on the weekend and come Monday she was brought back to her beloved house. In advance of Judy's arrival, Sarah and her brother Rob, who with his wife Cathy had been Judy's principal caregiver, had rearranged the furniture for her to be able to lie on the rented hospital bed installed in the centre of the glassed-in back porch and gaze out to the trees and the river. Gone, the insipid beige and tan palates of the hospital ward; gone the tubes and IV bags and sliding trays and plastics; gone the rotation of nurses and trays of awful food, gone the gut-wrenching loneliness of the other two patients in the room. At home, Judy was able to lie in her own sheets beneath her own blankets, in the sky-blue turtleneck she'd bought on sale the week before her fall.

"You can't go wrong in a turtleneck," Judy said.

The frown that never left her in hospital had been dispelled, and Judy returned to being her more usual self almost permanently in a state of delight. Now here

she was, restored and revelling even in the little things. A slice of crispy bacon from the Stagecoach, the local family restaurant that was her regular spot, discreetly fed to the dog. A piece of the elaborate layered cake her Toronto granddaughter Nathalie had made, or a bite of the butter tart from the 13th Street Winery one of the nurses had brought because – in Ontario, we know this to be a very contentious issue – Judy had proclaimed theirs her favourite.

And of course the taste of a glass of bubbly each day at 4:30. “My friends tell me I’m a glass half-full sort of girl,” said Judy, “I tell them I’m just happy to have a glass!”

She’d wanted to die on the Saturday, which would have been her 88th birthday, but the palliative doctor said his wife didn’t want him working weekends.

“Okay,” said Judy, “how about Friday, then?”

“What time?”

She thought a moment. “Eleven fifty-nine.”

“I don’t think I can enter that in the program. How about 11:50?”

“That’ll be fine,” Judy said.



The white clapboard house in Niagara-on-the-Lake is possibly a century old, teeming with the books and artworks that Judy amassed over the years.

KATE MACLACHLAN

In the intervening four days, the sunlit room at the back of the house became an extraordinary bower of love, Judy’s heart at its centre, giving, receiving. Her children and grandchildren and their partners, and her best friend of 69 years,

Beth Ann (who affectionately pointed out this meant she'd known Judy longer than any of us), sat as a steady train of visitors passed through sharing food, stories, laughter, and surprisingly few tears. At regular intervals, the family FaceTimed absent Sophie in London, now nine months pregnant and overdue, to include her in a selfie or for a chat and an update of their contrasting conditions.

"Where's that baby?!" hollered Judy each time.

The house that had been like a door to another era now felt as if it had dropped out of time completely: neither rushing, nor the slightest sense of anyone needing or wanting to be anywhere else. The experience of MAID was proving at once modern and oddly 19th century. Behold the dying parent with her head on a pillow and tucked into her well-made bed, behold the family in attendance, the anachronism that Judy's appointment with her maker was definite and exact.

Friends, as well as a couple of the PSWs surprised by their assignment, wondered why Judy, seemingly in good health, had decided to end her days. Always, she provided the same answer.

"I've had a wonderful life – I'm still having a wonderful life – but it's over!"

The rector at St. Mark's, where Judy had volunteered for decades, stopped in.

"Sometimes people ask me if I'm headed to heaven or hell," said Judy. "I tell them neither – I'm going to history!"

"May I say a few words?" the rector asked.

"Certainly."

Three men Judy had known since their youth, all in their 60s now, came to pay their respects, sitting quietly as if they were boys again. Three generations of the same family arrived together, and then the neighbour in the house below who'd put on, prematurely, blue Christmas lights in her window as a tribute. Judy, the whole town knew, adored Christmas. More colour, more festivities, more life.

A decades-old friend in the early stages of dementia showed up three days in a row with a hydrangea bloom from her garden, Judy greeting her jubilantly as if each time was the first.

“It’s like sitting shiva before a death,” a Jewish friend said.

A woman who’d grown up alongside Judy’s children came by, pulled up a chair and stayed a while.

“Thank you for letting me sit here and just be,” she said.

From time to time, Judy’s eyes closed – it doesn’t mean I’m asleep, she was quick to say – and one among us said it was unusual to be with someone in her situation, would she occasionally share her thoughts, no matter how random.

Judy’s eyes opened.

“The sky is so blue, the leaves are so beautiful, and you’re all so dear.”

“Do you have any secrets?” asked her granddaughter, Kate.

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “I’m a millionaire! But you’ll have to find the money because I forgot where I put it!”

Chris, one of the trio of men who’d sat in quiet audience, was a volunteer in the kitchen of the local Legion on Thursday nights for their fish ‘n’ chips dinners and offered to feed the whole family if Judy wanted, this the last meal of her choosing, which she did.



Beth Ann Martin, bottom right, sits by her friend Judy as family members gather round in the back porch.
NATHALIE MARSH

And then suddenly it was the Friday morning and over the course of it each of us embraced her a final time, whispered a few words in her ear and, when it came my turn, I told her she wasn't going anywhere, that there was too much of her in her children and grandchildren for her life to be over.

"Would you like me to recite the Lord's Prayer?" Beth Ann asked.

"Yes," said Judy, tenderly.

"Maybe some lipstick," said Beth Ann.

Judy, never without it, applied some of the Revlon "Love That Red" she preferred, tubes of it to be found in every room in the house, and Beth Ann took her hand, leaned in, and spoke the words softly, this woman whom everyone knew would be bereft without the friend she'd hitchhiked across Europe with nearly 70 years before. Now the tears started to flow, how could they not, Andrew keeping himself at a distance and weeping by the door. Nathalie asked if Judy would like to listen to some music, which she did, and went to look for a Frank Sinatra CD but Judy called out and suggested Vera Lynn instead.

A little after noon, the doctor appeared.

"I'm sorry," said the doctor. "I thought 10 to 12 was when you wanted me to arrive and was waiting outside in my car."

"No matter," said Judy. "You're here now."

"I can see why you like it here," he said. "It's a beautiful spot."

"Isn't it gorgeous?" said Judy. "I'm in heaven already."

The doctor inserted a port into the back of Judy's hand. She lifted it up, examined it, and said,

"Gorgeous!"

"I'll be about 15 minutes," said the doctor, and he went to prepare his medicaments in the next room. Judy's father had been an amateur actor, the

apogee of his career a bit part in the film Niagara with Marilyn Monroe, and the family sang a few of the vaudeville songs he'd taught them as children.

The doctor returned, carefully laying out a series of filled syringes of various sizes on the small bedside table. Sarah took her mother's free hand in her own and kept it there.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm obliged to ask. Do you still want to proceed?"

With a gravitas she'd not shown in any of her conversations with us, Judy gazed at the doctor and simultaneously somewhere far beyond him.

"Yes," she said.

And he started, with a saline solution initially, and then a drug to make her sleep.

"Some people report a taste of garlic," the doctor said.

"Garlic!" said Judy. "Wonderful!"

The phone rang, startling everybody.

"Not now," Judy shrieked. "I'm busy!"

Were these her last words?

Judy's eyes closed a final time and the doctor explained that she'd still be able to hear us for a while. He continued through his sequence and when he came to the two large syringes of lethal white substance he needed to push through the port and narrow tube and into her vein, his hands shook with the pressure he needed to apply. A part of me dreaded the tube slipping and the whole procedure going awry – had a doctor ever needed to perform the procedure twice?

"Usually there are just one or two people," said the doctor in apology, all 10 of us by him as he worked.

No one broke the silence, and in those long minutes it was impossible to put out of mind that science was being applied to put an end to a life. And yet how intimate and affecting the moment was. Yes, there was sorrow, and yes,

discomfort, but not doubt. We were participants, all of us, and the woman dying was still the person we knew. How often had friends come to me in their reluctance to visit a close friend or a relative with a lousy prognosis, and I'd urged them to go see that person now, while he or she was still present, and not yet someone transformed by illness and its treatments into an unrecognizable stranger.

The doctor pressed his stethoscope to three spots on Judy's chest, retracted it and stood back.

"Judy's heart has stopped beating," he said.



CAPTION ▼

Judy died a few minutes short of her 88th birthday, when her family celebrated the long and fulfilling life she lived.

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And that, you would think, was the end of it. Judy had passed through to the far side of the door and left the rest of us to gradually exit the time warp and return to the world we'd left behind. Commerce. Traffic. Ukraine. Israel. Palestine. How extraordinary to have been in a room where love and not hatred, not anger, had flourished right up to and including the very end.

Except this was not the end of the story. The sun still shone, the last days of October unseasonably warm, and for the whole of that afternoon, winds rushed through the trees and fluttered their red, orange, green and gold autumn leaves. How easy it was to believe that a spirit was passing through.

“Could be so,” said Andrew. “This is the time of year when many cultures believe the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest.”

We walked, we ate, we went to bed. We thought, we slept, and in the morning thought some more. The next day, on what would have been Judy’s 88th birthday, we gathered at the Stagecoach in her honour.

One of the staff approached the table to commiserate. “I’ll never forget the whoop she’d let out when she wanted more coffee,” she said.

Grief is what we were feeling, except that satisfaction and even awe at the tail end of such a fulfilling, and unforgettable time of profound contact felt as appropriate. Hard it was, not to envy the brilliance of a departure managed, like everything else in Judy’s life, on her own terms.

“Can you believe it,” said Sarah, “her pulse was steady the whole time.”

In time, I expect, MAID will become institutionalized and less of the remarkably humane process Judy and the rest of us had lived. The economics of efficiency will take over, and there’ll be no doctor in his civvies making house calls. Instead, we’ll be driving to the allocated wing of an especially designated hospital, and there’ll be rules about how many of us can attend, where we can stand and for how long.

And in time, Judy’s house will be sold and levelled, its door to another era closed once and for all. And yet it was impossible to conceive of Judy’s end as a loss. This, surely, had been a good death.

Then, suddenly from the next table, a text and a mother’s loud cry, a burst of tears, and the door opening again. Sophie’s husband texted to say he was at the hospital, Sophie was in labour, and too much was happening too rapidly for him to be able to speak, he’d call when he could.

Three hours later, Sophie would give birth to a baby boy, his middle name Jude.

“I like to think they waved at each other on the way through,” Sophie said.

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