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Opening extract from

Before Green Gables

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1

Walter Leaves for Work

Bertha Shirley stood at the door of their little yellow house, and waved goodbye to Walter as he turned on to the road that would eventually take him to the Bolingbroke High School. His arms were too full of books to wave back, but his smile told her everything she needed to know. She continued to watch him as he journeyed down the long road that led to the Hepworth house. Geoffrey Hepworth taught science at the school, and would be waiting for Walter, with the horse and buggy ready for the trip across the green marshlands and into the centre of town.

Walter had hoped to do the long journey by foot, but today was the first day of the fall term, and he had too much to carry. Usually he counted on that early morning walk to clear the cobwebs out of his head before starting his first geometry class. After the walk, and after that class, Walter always felt ready for anything. There was something so orderly, so logical, so *predictable* about geometry – in fact, about all branches of mathematics. Everything seemed to *fit*. He loved the subject he taught with the same intensity that Bertha felt for the material she'd been teaching in the same school – until last June.

Bertha stayed in the doorway long after Walter had

disappeared behind the tangle of rose bushes and wild apple trees at the west corner of the Hepworth property. She wished she was with him. She was longing to step into a classroom today, and start opening the students' eyes and ears – not to mention their brains – to the miracle of good poetry. To Wordsworth, to Keats, to the new poet Matthew Arnold. And *Shakespeare*. Supposing their new teacher didn't *care* about Shakespeare! Bertha couldn't really see why you weren't supposed to be a teacher just because you were married.

She'd asked a few people that question: 'Why can't you do both?' The answer was always the same: 'Because you should be home, looking after your husband. 'Why couldn't they look after *each other*? The house was tiny, and their meals were simple. You didn't need to dust every single surface *every day*. She'd done all the cooking on her father's farm after her mother died, and she was so good at it that she could make a whole meal – dessert and all – in twenty-five minutes. And laundry? In the summer, Walter had always helped her to wring out the sheets and to fill the big water heater on the stove. He could still do that if she changed her washday to Saturday. Bertha sighed, and turned to reenter the house.

2
Jessie's Revelation

'Mrs Shirley!' Mrs Shirley!' Where was the voice coming from? Bertha looked over her shoulder and could see a figure racing down the road in the direction of the yellow house, hair escaping from its pins, apron flying. Bertha turned around again and waved. It was Jessie Gleeson. Bertha's hair always stayed put, no matter how she arranged it, regardless of what she was doing. So much of her small self was tidy – outwardly serene and orderly – that she exuded a kind of warm peacefulness. She often had some pretty untidy thoughts, but she kept most of those tucked away inside.

Jessie Gleeson was a different matter entirely. When she was running along the road, her hair would inevitably escape from its pins and combs – or whatever had been installed to keep it in place. It was typical that she had forgotten to take off her apron – and that it was flying all over the place as she raced along. And the fact that she was yelling – *yelling* – as she ran down the street would surprise no one who knew her.

When Bertha and Walter had moved into their little house in June, Jessie had made quite a few friendly calls. But she'd stopped coming. Every once in a while, when Bertha's mind

had nothing better to do than to dream up worries, she wondered if she'd done anything to offend Jessie. She liked Jessie, and hoped this wasn't the case. Why the succession of eager visits and then . . . nothing? Bertha smiled, and motioned Jessie to come in, when the panting woman came abreast of the house.

But Jessie just stood at the end of the lane and shook her head. She was still breathing too heavily to manage a full sentence. 'Can't,' she puffed. 'Bread in oven. Come to my house. Children back in school. Nice and quiet. Tea's steeping.'

Bertha laughed. Well, this wasn't as thrilling as teaching *Hamlet*, but it was a lot better than dusting perfectly clean shelves. She closed the door, ran down the steps and joined Jessie.

By now, Jessie had some of her voice back.' I saw Mr Shirley striding by on his long legs – on his way to school,' she said. ' Figured you might be lonesome all alone in that tiny house.'

'Thank you,' said Bertha. ' Yes. It'll be nice to have a little visit.'

When they'd settled down on the two kitchen rockers, there was a brief awkward silence.

Then Jessie spoke.' Guess you wondered why I stopped coming to call.'

'Well, I did wonder if . . .' Bertha didn't know how to end the sentence.

'Well, stop wondering,' said Jessie. ' I didn't know how to explain, but suddenly I got to thinking I had to tell you anyway. When I saw Mr Shirley drive off with Geoffrey, I knew you were alone. You're never alone . . .' Her voice trailed off.

'And?'

'And I felt the courage rise in my chest. "I'll tell her", I thought.'

'Tell me what?'

'That after a while I couldn't stand coming to your place.'

'Why?' exclaimed Bertha. '*Why?*'

'I couldn't stand all that loving going on all the time. It wasn't like you were hugging or *touching* or anything. It's the way he follows your every move, even when you're just doing some simple little thing like stirring your tea. And you, too. Watching him, watching him, like he had wings.'

He does have wings, thought Bertha. *She's absolutely right. And Shakespeare himself couldn't have described it any better. Jessie never got beyond Grade 5, but she's a poet.*

But Jessie was still talking.

'Maybe I wouldn't have minded that so much if Gerald had *ever*, in the twelve years of our marriage – even just *once* – looked at me like that.'

'Never?' said Bertha.

'Well . . .' Jessie paused for a moment. 'Maybe from time to time, when . . . well, *you know*. But that's different. This seems to happen to the two of you every single day, even when you're sitting on opposite sides of a room.'

Bertha listened, wondering what she was going to reply to this woman.

'And he's often cross and cranky with me. Gerald, I mean. When I burn the toast or if one of the children is crying. When anything sort of gets in his way. Even when it's not my fault.'

She stopped talking, and Bertha found herself able to say, 'I'm sorry, Jessie.'

'Well, it's not your fault, Mrs Shirley. Or maybe even Gerald's. I know he worries about money. Six mouths are a lot to feed. He gets a lot of headaches. And working in a factory must be pretty awful. Anyway, I'm used to it. The sky won't fall. But all of a sudden, I felt like my heart couldn't survive all those adoring looks that were passing back and forth between you and your husband. So I came to a decision.'

'Which was?'

'To go see you when you're alone. Or to ask you to come over to see me. I'd like to be your friend, but I think maybe this is the only way I can manage it, Mrs Shirley.'

'Which is fine with me,' said Bertha, 'but only if you call me Bertha. When you call me Mrs Shirley, you put up a fence between us.'

Bertha left soon after this, with a new jar of gooseberry jam in her pocket and a fresh loaf of bread under her arm. As she walked back to her house she thought about how she'd miss seeing Walter at noontime. They'd always had their lunch together last year, when she'd still been at the school. She thought about how funny-looking he was, with his broad nose, his blueberry eyes, his dark red hair – coarse and straight – the freckles on the back of his long fingers, his wide and friendly mouth. So funny-looking, and yet to her so beautiful. And yes, equipped with wings.

Bertha walked through the house to the back door, and opened it wide. She looked at the flat marshlands that led to the river, still green in the warm September air. She loved that river, with its slithery mudbanks at low tide, and its lazy,

slow-moving water when the tide was high. She watched groups of dark birds flying low over the grasses, and listened to their harsh but compelling voices. *They're getting ready for their journey south. It'll be warm, maybe hot, with pelicans and palm trees and long beaches. But I don't want to follow them. I want to stay exactly where I am, looking at my beloved muddy river ambling along, and waiting for the return of Walter at four o'clock. I want things to stay exactly the same, forever.*

3
Walter Returns

At three o'clock, Walter stuffed his books and pens and chalk and pencils into his desk, and prepared to leave the school. Unlike Bertha's orderly self, Walter was untidy and absent-minded, and by tomorrow he would have forgotten exactly where he had put all those things. His whole person followed the same pattern. Even inside the school or at home, his hair looked as though he was standing on a cliff in a windstorm. An hour after he had put on one of his freshly ironed shirts, he would look as if he had slept in his clothes; and his shirttail had a way of creeping out of his trousers when he reached into the top shelf of the cupboard to get some chalk, or when he was writing something on the upper part of the blackboard. His personality was as untidy and unpredictable as his appearance. He had a roar of a laugh, which could burst forth at the most surprising times – as, for instance, as he wrote down QED, after demonstrating the miraculous perfection of a theorem in geometry. This would be a laugh of pure joy, and had been known to make mathematicians out of some very unlikely students. His enthusiasms were contagious, and many of his students grew to love his often-unpopular subject.

Geoffrey Hepworth, his horse, and his buggy had gone

ahead, while Walter had been patiently explaining a tricky equation in algebra to one of the students. By the time he was ready to leave, Walter was sorry that Geoffrey hadn't waited for him. The thirst for exercise – so strong in the early morning – had completely deserted him by the time the classroom clock told him it was three forty-five. So close to four! And he hadn't seen Bertha since half past seven. An eternity! With a marvellous lack of logic (in view of how much he revered it), he squeezed his long legs around one of the students' seats and laid his arms on the top of the desk. And thought about how much he wanted to be home in the little yellow house – RIGHT NOW. He wanted to just snap his fingers and *be there*. He stared at the blank blackboard and thought about Bertha's face, with its exquisite nose (his, after all, was so huge), its perfect little chin, her enormous eyes – sometimes green, sometimes grey – and her sweet mouth with its ready smile. Walter shut his eyes and thought about her skin. Not a mark, not one single freckle – a flawless alabaster, or maybe ivory. He sighed with the wonder of it all. That these astonishing physical marvels were joined to such a warm and generous spirit, to such *intelligence*, made the whole human combination a minor miracle. But that such a person could have agreed to marry *him – there* was the *major* miracle. He was so weak from that particular astonishment that he had difficulty untangling himself from the undersized desk and chair, and could scarcely navigate the two miles that lay between him and the yellow house.

But eventually Walter arrived. He was almost an hour later than he had planned, and Bertha had been worried – dreaming up a school fire (centred on his side of the

building), a roadway accident involving a runaway horse, a premature heart attack. But she spoke of none of this, as he enveloped her at the doorway with a long and tender hug. In the coming weeks, the neighbours who witnessed Walter's departures and arrivals were to say that when he left in the morning it was as though he was going to war, and that his arrivals in the late afternoon were like a triumphant return from a major battlefield.

On this particular day, Walter sat down in the kitchen and told Bertha about his first day back at school, as she moved around the room preparing their meal. Although he was talking about his own adventures, his eyes never left Bertha, as she cut up the cabbage, poked the boiling corned beef with a long fork, peeled potatoes, and then set the table. After checking her watch, she suddenly, in a quick and graceful movement, took the cabbage and potatoes and dropped them, one by one, into the pot of corned beef, with a kind of artistic flourish. To Walter, it was all like a performance by some acclaimed dancer, choreographed especially for him and presented in a private showing. For her part, Bertha listened to every word he spoke, even while she was busy preparing and timing the meal and moving to and fro. Later, at the table, she would comment on his account of his day, asking him questions about details of his teaching, while skilfully hiding the fact that she secretly hated mathematics, almost failed algebra in the eleventh grade, and had a particularly strong distaste for geometry. *Small wonder*, she thought, as she passed the butter to Walter, *that Jessie doesn't enjoy being with Walter and me in this house. There must be altogether too much visible harmony.*

4
Tea with Jessie

Several weeks passed, and it was now mid-October. Bertha had coped with her new isolation and loneliness – and her ongoing homesickness for her English classes at the high school – by going on walks in the nearby woods and marvelling at the spectacular fall colours. She loved the brilliant reds of the maples best – maybe because they were intense and exaggerated, a bit like Walter's personality. Bertha had always been pretty, and had had lots of boyfriends, but she'd never known anyone as energetic and unpredictable as Walter, so full of laughter and surprises. In spite of his strange looks, girls were attracted to him, and Bertha was amazed that he had chosen her over so many admiring others. As if it were yesterday, she could remember that day at Normal School, when he'd had a whole crowd of young people bent double with laughter. Suddenly he stopped talking and walked over to where she was standing on the fringes of the group, bent over, and whispered in her ear, 'Let's go downtown and have a cup of tea.' He took her hand, and they walked out of the room, with her feeling like Cinderella being chosen by the Prince. She'd never lost that feeling, never got used to it. She'd always thought she was colourless and dull, with her pale yellow hair and her chalk-white skin, and here she was

actually *married* to this man who seemed to think she was the most beautiful woman in the world – and the most *interesting*. When she'd tell him about her walks in the woods among the wild, unbridled colours of the autumn trees, he'd listen with as much enthusiasm as if she were quoting a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

But today it was Monday. The weekend was over, and Walter had gone off to school again, leaving her with the dishpan and the scrub board and the recipe book and the broom and the duster. It wasn't enough. She missed him, but she also longed for the lively give-and-take of her English classes, the spirited discussions about the meaning of Hamlet's actions and inaction, the plight of Cordelia, the fall of Lady Macbeth. Bertha hated Mondays. She knew she was an unskilled and reluctant housekeeper; but she also knew that she had been a good teacher. As soon as she got into a classroom and started introducing students to the literature she loved, all her shyness dropped away from her, and she became a whole other person. And Bertha liked that person.

Walter had told her that seven separate students had told him that English classes had never been the same, had never been as exciting, since she left. It was clear that they missed her as much as she missed them. Bertha could feel some sort of cosmic injustice gnawing away at her spirit. Besides, she didn't feel well, and had been feeling like this for several weeks. Maybe she was dying of some awful wasting disease. Consumption, perhaps. She hadn't told Walter about this, because she knew he was busy, and often tired. She didn't want to worry him, to add to his load. But to tell the truth, she wished she had more of a load herself.

Jessie had always been the one to call on Bertha – to arrive at the Shirley door with an expectant and half-ashamed look on her face. Now, suddenly, it was Bertha who needed Jessie. She put a light coat on over her dress and walked quickly out the door – quickly, in case she might change her mind. Her old shyness was on her, like an extra skin, and she found it hard to walk down the road, up the Gleeson lane and steps, and then to knock on that closed door. When Jessie opened the door, Bertha said haltingly, 'I thought . . . you might have some tea . . . on the back of your stove.'

Jessie's obvious delight at hearing those words made the veil of shyness slide right off Bertha's spirit. Jessie welcomed her as though she were the Queen herself.

'Come in! Oh, come in!' Jessie cried. 'I'm *so* happy to see you! And I just took some pumpkin tarts out of the oven, so we can have a really delicious party. Oh my, oh my! Such a lovely thing to happen on such a boring morning. I've been missing Jenny so much since she started school. I was deep down in the dumps, and so wishing that a miracle would happen in my kitchen. And you're it!'

Jessie had never before been approached by one of what she called 'the upper ladies.' She knew that Bertha was an 'upper lady,' even though she was younger than Jessie, and probably poorer. She had a way of speaking that was just a little bit different from her own. Not a whole lot different, but still . . . And Bertha was a *schoolteacher*. Jessie had been able to muster the courage to call on Bertha, but every time she did it she found it difficult. And now – here was Bertha on her own doorstep, all of her own accord.

Bertha sized up this situation very quickly, and did all the

right things. She asked Jessie questions about her childhood, her parents, her siblings, Gerald's courtship, her own children. Jessie was delighted to supply all the answers. And Bertha found herself replying to Jessie's questions with the same ease.

When Jessie turned to remove more tarts from the oven, Bertha surprised herself with some new thoughts. *This must be what it's like to have a sister.* A sister must be someone who would tell you her secrets, knowing that you'd never tell them to anyone else. And you could tell her things, too, that you'd never dream of confiding to your parents or your brothers – or your husband. Bertha came from a long line of 'only children,' and now that her parents were both dead, she was all alone. She didn't even have any cousins. Suddenly she found herself saying, 'I'm all alone.'

'Bertha! What on earth do you mean?'

'I don't have any family. No parents. No sisters or brothers, no aunts and uncles. Not even a forty-second cousin.'

Jessie was so amazed that she almost spilled her tea. 'Oh, my heavenly days!' she cried. 'My mother had six brothers and sisters, and my father had eleven. Then they upped and had eight of their own children. I have seventeen aunts and uncles, and more first cousins than I've even tried to count. Can you imagine what it's like around here at Christmastime? Being as most of us live in Bolingbroke or close by, there are a lot of turkeys sizzling away in about ten ovens. Then the cooks cover them up – right in their pans – and we all run out and get our wagons, all wrapped up warm against the frosty air. Like a bunch of racehorses, we gallop off to my mother's house, rushing to get there before the turkeys get cold. She's got the biggest house with the biggest tables.

You can't believe what it's like. All those grown-ups in their best clothes, with the women looking so pretty, making sure when we sit down that at least an inch of our petticoats are showing. And the more lace, the better. The men keep checking the time on their pocket watches so that people can admire the big clunky chains on them. It's the only time, except sometimes in church, that men haul those watches out of their chiffoneers. And all the children showing off their new toys, and little boys pulling the girls' pigtails, and a few babies crying. I've never eaten a Christmas turkey in my life – without the sound of a crying baby in the background. Oh, Mrs Shirley, dear – excuse me, Bertha – you can't believe what a wonderful day it is.'

Bertha tried to push down a little tide of envy that she could feel trying to drown her. 'Yes,' she said, 'I can imagine all of it. Noise and colour and laughter, and everyone happy – except the babies!' And then Bertha laughed so that Jessie wouldn't realize how sad she was feeling. When she was a young girl, she was the one who had had to cook the Christmas bird – and it had to be a chicken, because she and her father would never have been able to eat a whole turkey – even a tiny one. They'd get dressed up in their best clothes and sit for a while in the 'best parlour' because it didn't seem right to be sitting in the kitchen on Christmas Day. The parlour was so empty and quiet and *unfamiliar* that they often couldn't think of anything to say to each other. After all, the only person who was ever invited to sit in there was the Presbyterian minister. They were both quiet people, and this was fine, most of the time. But – somehow – not on Christmas Day.