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Tree Line

Rachel King

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Tree Line

Rachel King

Thesis submitted to the
Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of

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in
Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

This short novel explores both interclass relationships and Prince Edward Island’s land reform movement while telling the story of seven characters’ interwoven lives during the early autumn of 1835.

Rachel King
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As a child, I was a listener. I could talk well, and did, when solicited, but I preferred to listen. To me, it seemed as though while talking I might miss out on some facet of people or the world. There was so much to hear: my mom’s kind, inquisitive conversations with various people, my brother’s humorous stories, my classmates’ arguments, my grandpa and dad’s discussions of land use rights. Every person seemed to have intertwining, overlapping, competing, or independent reasoning for what they said or did. I also listened to the piano, which I initially played as a chore, and then, like Annie Dillard says, “as I did most things, in order to concentrate.” Hearing a line of melody was like hearing a character in a book, simultaneously not as real and more real than listening to people. This was an artistic listening; at once controlled—I could play or read at will, and uncontrolled—I had to play or read what was on the page. Bach taught me that two or more melodies could be played simultaneously, at once independent and interrelated, a technique called polyphony. In his Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bahktin expands this term beyond its musical origin, asserting that Dostoevsky created a polyphonic way of artistic thinking, one which not only allows all voices their own validity, but also asserts that these voices cannot exist apart from one another and that they change one another. Dostoevsky was my first literary love, an author I’ve moved beyond but whose characters and stories I loved with such intense adolescent abandon that he will forever shape the writer I am. What a pleasure to discover that he, too, was a listener. What a pleasure to find a critic who so eloquently expresses and affirms how I view the world.

For me, creating fiction begins with a certain character in a specific situation. Through love enhanced by close physical and emotional observance, I decipher a character’s particular truth. As the realist photographer, Robert Frank, strove to do, I am “always looking outside, trying to look inside, trying to say something that is true.” Characters, each with their own particular truths, interact with one another, creating a dialogical relationship in which their truths are challenged and change while remaining essentially their own. These dialogical relationships exist in my short short stories but even more so in my longer short stories or this short novel, where page length allows a broader and deeper exploration of multiple characters and their interactions. Because these characters have lives outside the borders of the story, I insist on open or ill-defined beginnings and endings for each of them. Bahktin says such “unfinalizable”
characters populate polyphonic novels. Souls are complex and dynamic; the writer, the readers, and the characters can only know and communicate so much.

I hope *Tree Line* could be deemed polyphonic. When my peers asked me what my short novel was “about,” I replied, initially, “A romance between a young man and woman from different classes on mid-nineteenth-century Prince Edward Island.” But that was inaccurate; it is not primarily a romance. “The land reform movement in Prince Edward Island in the 1830s” sounds like the subtitle of a history dissertation, and “a man grieves over the death of his best friend, killed in an election brawl” may be, right now, my favorite subplot, but that description is incomplete. This inability to summarize speaks to the complexity of the story, as well as to the importance and inseparability of the seven main characters: Norman, John, Charles, Marilla, Hugh, Elisabeth, and Matthew. This is their story, collectively and individually, it is about them—how they react to and/or propel the incidents on their lot during the fall of 1835. It is not an accident that the titles of many of my short stories begin to define the main character: “Elevator Girl,” “The Sitter,” “Spice Lady,” and even “Neighbors,” to an extent. It is also not an accident that the characters in *Tree Line* are often referred to by their relationships to one other instead of by name: “his father,” “her brother,” “his friend,” “their agent,” “his tenant.” My stories’ aboutness overflows from who the characters are and who they relate to on an intimate level. And if any of my characters are flat, I think it’s a failure of love as much as a failure of imagination or skill. I have not listened attentively; I do not know them well enough to document honestly and accurately how they view themselves and how they interact with others. During the final scenes in part two and part four, after Norman burns his land and after Charles shoots Hugh, I listened for a long time before hearing characters’ responses. Hopefully the result works. Not in the sense that the individual reactions are “in-character” necessarily, but that the whole forms a polyphony. At times, I wondered why a Bach score instructed me to play a dissonant interval, each note part of a different melody. Although my fingers only touched these notes for a split-second, it didn’t sound good. But when I didn’t listen to the notes in isolation, the dissonant interval either dissolved into surrounding melodic intervals or somehow, after hearing those surrounding intervals, sounded, maybe not good, but correct.

As an adult, I am a listener. Does a person ever change all that much? All over town I listen: in the library, at the grocery store, on the bus, at the park, on the streets, at the gym. Sometimes, I accidentally learn so much about strangers that I share details with friends while we watch them from the other side of a bar. When I’m tired of human voices, I listen to music. Over and over, I watch Glenn Gould play Bach on YouTube. Adrienne Rich says Bach’s music is a “love that is not pity” that “[asks] of us a grace in what we bear.” Gould’s combination of technical precision and quiet passion perfectly parallels Bach’s. And, although the pieces contain no lyrics, while Gould plays, he sings.
Works Cited


“John Blythe was a nice boy. We used to be real good friends, he and I. People called him my beau.”
Anne looked up with swift interest. "Oh, Marilla—and what happened?—why didn't you—"
"We had a quarrel. I wouldn't forgive him when he asked me to. I meant to, after awhile—but I was sulky and angry and I wanted to punish him first. He never came back—the Blythes were all mighty independent. But I always felt—rather sorry. I've always kind of wished I'd forgiven him when I had the chance."
"So you've had a bit of romance in your life, too," said Anne softly.
"Yes, I suppose you might call it that. You wouldn't think so to look at me, would you? But you never can tell about people from their outsides. Everybody has forgot about me and John. I'd forgotten myself."

—Anne of Green Gables, Chapter 37
In 1767, the British government gave sixty-seven British gentlemen lots of land on the Island of St. John. These proprietors remained in England but acquired tenants to settle their lots and agents to manage them. Year after year, the proprietors refused both to pay the yearly quit-rents they owed the British government and to grant the tenants’ requests to buy land. The British government overlooked the gentlemen’s failing; the tenants became angry. In 1835, forty years before Anne Shirley came to live with Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert at Green Gables, tenant farmers on the Island began to be evicted for nonpayment of rent. And so began Escheat—a tenants’ political movement to own the land on which they lived and worked.
Part One
Norman McLean’s spare log cabin, built by his grandfather, perched on a low cliff on the westernmost side of Cecil Jacobs’s lot. On clear days, Norman could see across the Northumberland Strait to New Brunswick. Past the Island’s high grass, its red rock cliffs, and the sea, to the dark green haze of the opposite shore. To look at this view was one of the only times Norman stood still, one foot in front of the other, his arms crossed, his blonde beard tilted upward, his eyes the deep blue of the late afternoon summer sea. His mouth moved as though he were singing or talking to himself. Tenant farmers who came to call and found him like this slunk away, not wanting to intrude on something holy. They felt more comfortable with the Norman who helped them with their harvest and pounded his fist on their supper tables.

In the winter months, when farming families rested, prepared for spring planting, and cut down trees for firewood or to sell at shipyards, Norman and his wife, Helen, led iceboat mail carriers across the Strait to New Brunswick. Sometimes their crew made the twenty kilometer trip there and back in one day, pulling the boat across the sturdy shore ice, launching it into broken drift ice, hoisting it over icebergs, paddling it down open waterways or narrow canals glutted with ice chunks. Sometimes they spent half the day moving one kilometer forward and half the day retreating. Families traded stories about how Norman’s crew had camped two full days on the ice during a blizzard. Even after his wife drowned while iceboating, Norman continued in this work.

Hugh Cuthbert, Norman’s best friend since young adulthood, lived on the eastern side of the lot, a few farms away from their agent’s two-story, stone house. Hugh, as a young man, had assisted his father in building the Cuthbert’s three-room house and two adjacent barns. Ever since Norman’s wife had died, Norman ate with the Cuthberts at least two nights a week. To Matthew, Hugh’s son, who preferred listening
to speech, Norman told tales of the Island’s first settlers. He praised the breads of Clara, Hugh’s wife, and when she died, he praised the soups their daughter, Marilla, made. He brought gifts of rabbit, salmon, and beer.

For years Norman had encouraged Hugh and other tenant farmers to withhold their rent. He persuaded no one on his own lot but had convinced a dozen farmers in the area to halt their payments. That spring Norman had cut off their rent collector’s horse’s tail, overseen boys throwing dung and rocks at the agent’s summer house, and written protest letters to his agent, his proprietor, and the Island’s governor. The agent, Charles Blythe, and his family arrived in late September to stay a month, their standard vacation from Charlottetown. This year Charles decided to collect the fourth-quarter rent himself.

The morning after the Blythes’ arrival, Norman stalked across the lot to talk to Charles. A red road ran the length of the lot, and paths of various widths ran toward houses, into fields, down to the sea or ponds or creeks. Norman skirted around an open wagon, deep in wheat. Next to it stood a tenant farmer, David Owen, tossing in bunches with a pitchfork. He paused as Norman passed. If David hadn’t known Norman’s latent ferocity and boundless energy, his neighbor’s long strides and swinging arms would have seemed comic and extravagant. David himself moved steadily and precisely, conserving energy. Norman passed a sugar maple grove, the tips of a few leaves red or orange. Another farmer, Alexander Thorburn, resting against a hoe, called out a greeting as Norman passed more acres of wheat, high and gold. Good morning, Norman called back. None of his neighbors would challenge Charles Blythe, but Norman rarely compared himself to them and, when he did, he didn’t hold this timidity against them. He didn’t view himself as a savior, as some of them did; he fought for the land out of an inner compulsion which drove some men to drink and
others to pursue positions of authority. The sun emerged above a pond and white pine
grove, and he squinted at its brightness.

Morning dew hung on the high grass bordering the Blythe place. A row of
bushes, their tips touching the second-story windows, grew along the front of the stone
house. Dung still stuck to a second-story window, where Norman had instructed a boy
to splatter it. A grey barn stood two-hundred meters toward the sea. Norman could tell
the door hinges were loose, because it wobbled as a young man pushed it open.

John, Charles’s son, walked from the barn toward the house, his chest and chin
leading. His hair was light brown, flat, and soft. He wore short brown boots, grey
trousers, a dark blue vest over a dark blue scarf and cream-colored shirt, rolled up to his
elbows. He held a milk pail in front of him, not to the side, as a farmer would. Every
other step, he bumped a thigh against the pail, and Norman smiled with both love and
mockery. When John saw him, the young man’s blue eyes looked alert, interested, and
skittish, like a disturbed bird’s.

Good morning, Norman said.

Good morning, John said. He sat down the milk pail and crossed his arms. He
glanced at the black front door.

As a child, John had tramped about the Cuthbert place with Matthew. As boys
they swam in the sea or swung in the hay loft together, and as young men Matthew had
taught John how to plow, use a scythe, and husk corn. The past couple summers,
Norman swore John had visited the Cuthbert place to court Marilla.

You going iceboating again this winter? Norman asked.

John relaxed his shoulders. I just might, he said.

You did well out there, Norman said.
John nodded. Norman had told him he should work as an iceboat runner ever since he had voiced a desire to run off to sea as a boy. He’d finally helped out for two weeks that past January. John remembered the low-ceilinged, dim bar in which he’d enlisted, signing with an X instead of his name because that’s what the men in front of him in line did. To not draw attention to himself, he kept quiet, but his gentlemen’s clothes and thin, uncallused fingers gave him away before his British accent. John rubbed a thumb against his palm. A hint of the calluses he’d gained remained. His father had not noticed them.

There’s some good women in New Brunswick, Norman said, referring to the shoreline brothels. The boy looked older than last winter, Norman thought. Thicker. Almost like a man. But less confident here than on the Straight. He stepped toward John, and John stepped backward. Got myself a new scar, Norman said, rolling up his sleeve, and sticking his arm over the pail. After you took off. John jutted his neck forward. A finger-length-long knife scar ran sideways across Norman’s upper arm. My own man did that, Norman said. Mutiny. Wanted to go into the blizzard instead of stay put.

You kill him? John asked. Norman, he thought, was the kind of man who, if provoked, might kill a someone.

No, knocked him out. When he came to, he was almost frozen.

You all survive?

Yes. I lost a toe.

John looked down as though he could see through Norman’s high black boots. Norman stuck out his right boot and gestured down. The smallest one, he said.

On one iceboating trip, Norman had trusted John to be coxswain, and at the end of the run told the young man he had an instinct for it. They were sitting next to one
another at a corner bar table in in New Brunswick, a table John often drank at alone.

Once you decide to try to figure out where the boat is going, you already know where the boat is going, Norman had told him, his head tilted sideways, one arm resting on the back of John’s chair, the edge of his other hand chopping against the table to emphasize words. But it takes you too damn long to decide to try.

I should go, John said, picking up the pail but not raising his eyes. He wanted to discuss their iceboating trips, but it seemed disrespectful to talk about that here, near his father. And he didn’t want his father to see he’d been milking. His father didn’t even know he knew how.

Lessons? Norman asked. Or your father?

John, still not looking up, tensed his shoulders. Don’t talk about my father, he said.

I respect your father, Norman said. In my own way. I’m talking about you.

Breakfast, John said. I need to eat breakfast. He smelled the usual breakfast biscuits even as nostrils retained the scents of cow and dung he hadn’t smelled in almost a year. He craved Norman’s respect as much or more than his father’s, but it was easier to vie for it on the ice than here. He swirled around. Milk sloshed against the sides of the pail.

Tell your father I want to speak with him.

John didn’t respond. He lifted his chin and chest and was inside the house in two strides and stepped into his older sister, Elisabeth. Shorter than him but with a similar thinness, delicate facial features, and light brown hair. Light brown eyes instead of his blue ones.

What did he say? she asked.
I’ll be right down for breakfast, he said. He pushed the pail into her hands and mounted the stairs, two at a time.

Once in his room, John looked out at Norman, who paced the length of the house. As though the world was too large to trek across but he could handle one limited piece of ground. His arms swinging, head lowered, eyebrows knitted. He was the only person John knew who paced. At the Cuthbert house, Norman would walk from the china cabinet, across the front of the hearth, all the way to the kitchen counter, and back, over and again. After Norman left, John would get down on his hands and knees and pretend to examine the wood floor as though looking for an indent. It made Marilla laugh. Looking ridiculous was worth it, John thought, if it made Marilla laugh.

His father, riding his horse, entered the path to the house. The horse shook his head at the sunlight speckling through birch branches. Norman, who hadn’t seen him yet, continued pacing. His father had been inspecting the farmland, as he would every morning of their stay. Norman, at the Cuthbert’s supper table, complained about these inspections; Norman said Charles acted as though he knew farming details and that their work couldn’t go on without his oversight. Norman didn’t stop or look up until his father brought his horse to a walk.

Hello, Charles, Norman said, crossing his arms. Nice morning for a pleasure ride. He cocked his head at his agent with tenfold the mockery he’d observed John’s handling of the pail, and none of the affection.

Charles kicked his riding boots against his horse’s flanks and rode in a trot toward the barn. Swirls of red dust rose around the horse’s feet.

Before Charles noticed Norman, he’d been composing a letter to Cecil Jacobs in his head, one in which he spoke at length about the fertile land and good harvest and in brief about rent-coll ecting difficulties and troublemakers such as Norman. Charles
wanted Cecil to remain confident that he could care for the land. One day, Charles hoped to buy the whole lot, to become the proprietor himself. He hadn’t shared this ambition with anyone, not even his wife.

Charles swung off his horse. He cursed the loose hinges as he yanked open the barn door. Why the devil did Norman think he could show up here, after all he’d done. Damn him. Another horse whinnied from a stall and Charles’s horse replied. The barn felt cool and dark after the long, brisk ride.

He removed the saddle, hung it on a wooden peg on the wall and, once he’d put the horse in his stall, rubbed him down, and gave him oats. Let Norman wait. In his letter, Charles had wanted to ask Cecil, casually, whether he himself should evict tenants if they didn’t pay rent. Not out of inability—there had been years, after bad harvests, when Charles allowed tenants to delay their payments—but out of rebellion. Norman hadn’t paid his rent for three quarters now. The hay and flax harvests had been better than expected. And the tenants he’d talked with that morning had predicted good wheat and potato harvests, too.

Charles opened the barn door, rumpled his soft, light-brown hair, and straightened his long black jacket. Norman had resumed pacing the length of the Blythe house, about facing abruptly at each end as though he would otherwise run into a wall. Fool, Charles thought. Stubbornness was a fault, and the only people who praised it were those who were stubborn themselves. Charles smoothed his mustache and stretched his long jaw. He had looked forward to talking over matters with his wife, but since Norman stood between them, he’d have to deal with this now.

With his shoulders pulled back, Charles strode past Norman. He fixed his eyes on a cracked window at which Norman, or those led by him, had thrown rocks. It was the first time Charles had seen it in full daylight, and it infuriated him. Birds were
making a ruckus. Less hospitable than the human noise in the city. He was opening the front door when Norman said his name.

Yes?
I want to speak with you.
Charles turned. What would you like to discuss?
Good lord. Norman pulled hard at his blonde beard.
The damaged window, perhaps? The shit I cleaned off my stone walls last night?
Norman pulled his beard again and stared at him.
Your rent payments? You owe three quarters worth.
You owe me land.
Charles stood on top of his two stone steps, a couple heads higher than Norman.
You know what I think about that.
Why hasn’t Cecil Jacobs responded to my letters? Norman asked.
You are one of many tenants. I do his business on the Island.
You haven’t responded, either.
Norman began pacing again. That seemed disrespectful, Charles thought, as though he himself, Norman’s superior, weren’t there, as though Norman had to figure things out on his own.
I responded, Charles said. I keep up with all my correspondence.
Norman contorted his face as though he were about to spit. You have not paid your rent for six months, he recited. It is my lawful right to evict you.
The letter was longer than that, Charles knew. He remembered composing it in his office in Charleston, his deft steel nib and oak desk, his view of the cobblestone streets below. How satisfied he’d been at the grace period he’d given to Norman, the only tenant he despised. And how comfortable they were in the city. Like his father
before him, he brought his family to this house in the autumn. For their health, and so he could teach his son to be an agent who understand the land and how to interact with tenants. But he never felt at home here. The quiet evenings and social isolation. And men like Norman, who acted as though the agent were an intruder, who would use a grace period to terrorize a rent collector.

He stepped off the porch and with a quiet yet firm voice halted Norman’s pacing. Your grace period is over, he said. You either pay today or you leave within the week.

They stood face to face, Charles looking down slightly at Norman. If they’d been in a tavern, men would’ve gathered to watch a fight.

You bastard, Norman said.

Charles fisted his hands but kept them at his side. What’s your decision, Norman? he said. Pay or leave?

A tenant is not much better than a slave, Norman shouted. Charles resisted the urge to step back. For a tenant to end his slavery, Norman continued, he either needs to acquire his land or leave his land.

These statements had opened a speech Norman had given at a rally held in a church in town. People had travelled from all over Queens County to hear him. Negroes are now free in England, he’d ended it. And we’re still enslaved in the new world. The men had cheered and met in small groups in the basement, eating stew and planning revolts in each lot of land. Less than half of the men had followed through.

Charles had been reading this rhetoric for years in the papers. He waved his hand. I assume you’ll leave then, he said, still calm. You must be gone by next Saturday.

I’ll be gone by tonight, Norman said, almost shouting. And you, you’ll be leaving soon, too.
He about faced and walked away. Charles crossed his arms and watched him leave. His hands shook. This embarrassed him, so he clasped them behind his back. Norman walked like a monkey, he noted, nimble and firm, yet almost bowlegged. The comparison assuaged his anger. He did work like a horse, Charles conceded, but that was no good because he had the intelligence of that mouse that had tried to live in his office walls last winter. The mouse had thought the walls were his home and his house the world. They’d thrown it outside, into the real world, where Charles was sure it had been crushed or eaten. Norman had no perspective. He’d never been away, not even to England, the country which, for the most part, owned and ran the world. Charles pulled at his mustache, shrugged his shoulders, and went inside to breakfast.

The Blythe’s French maid, Eleanor, had come to the country a few days early to air out the house. This morning she was serving an egg dish, tea, and biscuits. Charles smelled the food as he walked down the hallway.

In the dining room, Charles’s wife and daughter sat at the long oak table, eating. Charles had told them not to wait.

John entered the room behind Charles. Good morning, he said.

Charles turned his head. Good morning, he said. He frowned at the boy’s tardiness. If he wanted to go to England and leave John in charge next autumn, he needed to keep his son by his side. Charles had a lot to teach him.

His wife and daughter greeted them between laughs. Elisabeth wore a yellow dress, her hair coiled around her head, her body rocking back and forth, her eyes alert and intense. Anna, wearing a dark blue dress, sat up straight, her mouth severe, her voice deep. Soft morning sunlight shone through the high window beyond the table.

The Ramseys have a new baby, Elisabeth said.

Charles raised his eyebrows as he settled himself into a chair.
No, I didn’t visit them, Father, she said. Mother and I walked to the shore. Melinda and the baby were there. Melinda dipped the baby’s tiny feet in the water. She didn’t cry at the cold. She was fascinated with everything around her.

Charles unfolded his napkin, placed it on his lap, and surveyed the table. Elisabeth was leaning forward, looking at him. It was Elisabeth who was fascinated in everything around her. If she took interest in new tenants like she might take interest in a new foal, fine. Ten years ago, she had taught a tenant girl to read. He had forbidden that. You do not go to their houses, he had told her. Reading, for them, is an impractical skill. The girl’s father, Hugh Cuthbert, had agreed with him. The girl had skipped hours of apple picking to learn, which had not been acceptable to Hugh.

It’s lovely to be back here again, Anna said.

The wheat harvest looks good, Charles said. Though some predict a dry spell.

Elisabeth had inherited her do-gooder ways from her mother, Charles thought as he buttered his biscuit. Anna had taught Eleanor to read before the maid had been in the house a year. He’d never seen Eleanor read again. Like most peasants, she didn’t recognize nor take advantage of her privileges. He doubted that the Cuthbert girl was a reader, either.

I want you to come with me to collect rent this afternoon, Charles told John. The boy had sipped at his tea but hadn’t touched the food.

Yes, sir, John said. Aware of his father’s scrutiny, he dished up a spoonful of eggs. Silverware clicked against porcelain. He imagined himself standing in the Cuthbert’s sitting room beside his father, avoiding eye contact, attempting to hide his familiarity with the place.

You can occupy yourself until dinnertime, Charles said. After that, we’ll look over the accounts and go settle them.
Yes, sir, John said again. He took a biscuit and set it next to the eggs. Nothing looked appetizing. He’d seen Norman’s irate departure and guessed what it meant but wanted to know for certain. Saw Norman McLean around here this morning, he said.

Did he talk with you? Charles asked.

Said he wanted to talk with you, John said.

Did you talk with him, Charles? Anna asked.

Yes, Charles said. Went ahead and evicted him. It was either now or this afternoon.

John nodded, more to himself than his father, since he’d answered his mother, not him. Their eyes communicated something more than they’d said. They had a kind of understanding John hoped he’d someday share with his wife, even while their exclusive confidences made him feel a child.

What did he do? Elisabeth asked.

He hasn’t paid his rent all year, dear, Charles said.

He helps other families with harvest, Elisabeth said. Color rose in her cheeks. You could have at least waited until winter.

Besides Norman, only Elisabeth had the courage to stand up to their father, John thought. He mentally cheered her on even as she made him feel a coward.

For god’s sake, Elisabeth, Charles said. He’s helping incite tenants to rebel more than he’s helping with the harvest.

Now you’ve given him a real reason to rebel, she said. I hope he won’t harm you. He wouldn’t dare, Charles said. Norman didn’t have the audacity to hurt him. He might vandalize their house, but Charles could handle that.

Was he angry? Anna asked.
No angrier than normal, Charles said. His wife nodded and returned to her meal. He smiled when he saw Elisabeth’s frown. Really, Charles asked, have you ever seen him calm?

Elisabeth, averting her eyes, sipped her tea.

He made a vague threat, Charles said. It’ll come to nothing.

I don’t know about that, Elisabeth said. She looked back at him. You’d best be careful.

I’ll mind my business, Charles said. And you mind yours. When and where had Elisabeth acquired such impertinence? He liked her fiancé, but perhaps the young lawyer had taught her bad habits. We’re discussing, not arguing, she’d told Charles when he questioned their loud repartee. At least tenant children knew to be respectful of their parents, to keep silent on important matters.

As he picked up his fork and knife, a gesture to close the discussion, Anna squeezed his forearm and smiled. You did the best thing, she said. Otherwise he’d be continual trouble.

John wasn’t certain Norman wouldn’t still be trouble. His father didn’t understand Norman; he tended to imagine a man’s character and then surmise what a man with that kind of character would do. He was good at surmising, but since he’d imagined the character in the first place, his conclusions were often inaccurate. John stared out the window at the sea, across which Norman had led ice boats. He remembered when, on a foggy midday, the crew had to wait for a fog clearing. Norman went to scope out the weather while the rest of the crew warmed themselves around a fire. When one man was complaining about Norman’s leadership, Norman stepped out from the fog, his face pale and chapped, and punched the complainer, who fell onto the
ice. Norman’s kind did not leave without a fight, John thought. John buttered his biscuit so his father would stop looking at him.

After breakfast, John made sure his father was occupied in his office before he took off to the Cuthbert place. Early morning brightness had faded, and the day was windy and warm. John didn’t look up at the blue skies or out at the gold fields. He did not hear the croak of the gulls. His eyes focused a few feet ahead of him on the narrow, grassy path, but in his mind’s eye he saw the interior of the Cuthbert house. The pot over the hearth, the circular, braided rug in front of the wooden rocking chair, the white porcelain pitcher and basin that remained on the table except at meal times. He imagined what Marilla might be doing. Baking? Sewing? Washing clothes? Cleaning? She was on some sort of schedule for her tasks but he could never pin it down. Long before he consciously became aware of his attraction, she’d been a presence. When John and Marilla weren’t more than fifteen or sixteen, after supper he and Matthew squatted over the hearth, roasting nuts. Marilla swept around them, one hand clutching the top of the broom, the other holding the middle, her body moving in and out of the subdued evening sunlight. Her brushstrokes were quick and thorough; when she dropped one shoulder and twisted her torso it was almost as though she were dancing. Maybe today she was out helping the men in the fields. He hoped not. He wanted to talk with her alone. But he didn’t know what he’d say. It would sound foolish if he repeated something he’d said in his letters, but he couldn’t remember everything he’d written.

That autumn some of John’s peers would head off to university in England, but he’d convinced his father to allow him to remain on the Island, on the premise that he wanted to learn to be an agent. In reality, the career held little appeal for him. His
interest in politics and his political affiliations fluctuated from day to day, and he disliked managing others and the sedentary lifestyle. He wanted to be near Marilla.

The Cuthbert house stood at the top of a slight incline, but even so you couldn’t glimpse the sea from it. A grove of spruce trees spread beyond a creek near the back of the house toward the sea, the Cuthbert farming fields in front of the house, across the main road and then more fields beyond theirs, stretching until they met the horizon. John approached the house from the side, through the apple orchard, following the creek, and then diverged from it through waist-high grass. A dormant chest-high rose bush grew to the left of the front door.

John knocked, with two knuckles, and then again with four. He heard nothing inside and turned his head to put his ear against the door.

Good morning, John, Marilla said.

He turned. She stood before him, not smiling. He rarely saw emotion in her dark eyes. Her brown hair braided and twisted into a bun on the back of her head, and a light blue skirt flapped around her boots. In her arms, she held onions and carrots. The scars on her hands, which she tried to hide, were exposed. Matthew said she’d scalded herself while pouring boiling laundry water soon after her mother had fallen ill. She’d been nine.

Before he returned her greeting, she stepped past him, opened the door, and walked into the house. Her leaving the door open seemed an invitation to enter. He closed it behind him.

I need to go back out, she said without looking at him. She cradled the onions and carrots in one arm and gently placed them one by one on the counter with the other hand. To the garden.
John opened the door and stepped outside. Marilla picked up a flat, thick-handled wicker basket, stepped out beside him, and closed the door.

Feels like a storm, she said.

John looked across the landscape for the first time that day. Wind blew the high grass he’d walked through and the wheat across the road. A blue sky, but clouds edged the horizon. He followed Marilla to the garden on the far side of the house. She began picking green beans, using her thumbnail to pinch the beans off the vines. He crossed his arms and rocked back and forth on his feet.

In his letters, he’d told her he’d earned his own money that winter. He’d described the revelation he’d had when his iceboat crew had been forced to spend the night on the ice. They had chopped up one ice boat and used its wood to make fires under the two other overturned boats. Huddled over the fire, another iceboat runner had told him that lot proprietors in the north were selling off their lots in ten to forty acre chunks. The man, a Scotsman, said he wished he were British, because it would be easier to buy. That night, around the diminishing fire, as feeling receded from John’s fingers and toes, and he counted the sparks to stay awake, he swore that if he made it across the ice with all his extremities intact, he’d buy a plot of land and start his own farm. The next night, while rubbing feeling back into his toes at a Frenchman’s shack near the Island’s shoreline, he reaffirmed his vow. In this moment, those nights seemed long ago, and his desired future foolish and far away.

Sweat gathered above Marilla’s eyebrows. Unwilling to halt in her picking, she wiggled her nose and mouth to alleviate itching. The scent of tomato stalks and cucumber vines reminded John of other autumns.

May I help? he asked.

I need three tomatoes for supper, Marilla said. You can pick them.
She watched him as he leaned forward and lifted the vine with two fingers, his eyes searching for ripe ones. Last year, he’d accidentally picked a tomato with a swatch of green on its belly.

John was taller this summer, the span of his shoulders wider. He just seemed more there. Not as skittish as she remembered, not as eager to talk. Always, Matthew had absorbed more details than Marilla in John’s long-winded speeches. After supper, John would tell Matthew about boarding school or living in the city while Marilla worked around them. She watched John’s animated expressions and gestures but didn’t listen to what he said. City life, even his, didn’t interest or concern her.

When he looked up, she looked down at the beans, piled and criss-crossed in her basket.

I learned how to juggle this winter, he said. When our iceboat trips were canceled because of the weather.

When he threw the tomatoes into the air, Marilla yelped and stepped forward, one hand reaching toward him. She imagined them smashed on the ground, dirty and bruised beyond use. John didn’t drop them. At first the juggling seemed methodical—plop, plop, plop into his hands, but he soon tossed them faster, the tomatoes becoming streaks of red, ribbon-like circles in the air. John bit his lower lip in concentration, suppressing a grin.

His juggling slowed and stopped. He smiled at her. She nodded and went back to picking beans, her back to him.

It took hours to learn, he said.

Was there nothing else to do? she asked. The wind pulled at wisps of her hair.

Plenty, he said. But we had to wait until the fog cleared or the snow stopped. A French kid taught me. We stayed with his family. Sometimes we had to sleep on the
floor for. . . . He bit his tongue, remembering his vow not to repeat anything from his letters. What did she do during the winter? She hadn’t writte about herself. As he understood it, farmers relaxed, for a couple months at least. He imagined Marilla sewing by the light of a candle, her skirt of burgundy or blue the only color in the room. Concentration on her task eclipsing everything around her, as when he first saw her at age ten.

It was the first summer his family stayed an entire month. His father had been showing John and Elisabeth the layout of the lot. They had stopped on the main road a stone’s throw from the Cuthbert place. Marilla sat under an oak tree, one leg bent under her body, sewing a braided rug. She wore her hair in pigtails and didn’t look up when the Blythes approached or stopped. While his father explained to John that a tenant didn’t always farm the piece of land closest to his place, Elisabeth had gone over and knelt beside Marilla. Finding out that the girl didn’t know how to read, Elisabeth decided to teach her on the sly. Marilla insisted Elisabeth take pies or breads in exchange for the lessons. This foreign food in the Blythe kitchen betrayed Elisabeth. When Marilla came to the Blythe’s house to return Elisabeth’s books, John was in the front yard, helping one of their French hired hands with a bonfire. He told Marilla to keep the books, and that he’d give her other school books, too. He’d dropped by the Cuthbert place once, and then again and again, because he and Matthew would explore places on the lot that his father knew nothing about. Rocks off which seals dived, river spots to fish for salmon, a swamp where a cow had drowned. Matthew was also willing to listen to John’s ideas and plans, although John ended up learning more from his taciturn friend. Some evenings he stayed for supper, eating stew or soup and listening to Norman talk. He liked to watch Marilla adeptly and daintily go about chores. Unlike
the Blythe’s two house maids, who labored and sighed over tasks, she seemed to finish work without any effort.

Marilla’s basket was full. Her cheeks had reddened, and John realized he had been staring at her. A full-length brown apron covered her cream-colored blouse and new blue skirt. She’d probably sewn it that winter. She looked beautiful, he thought, but they didn’t talk like that.

I like your skirt, he said.

Thank you, she said. She stepped past him, her elbow brushing his vest.

Dark clouds had spread halfway across the sky. John thought he should go. Instead, he followed Marilla into the house, placed the tomatoes on the counter, and sat beside her at the table. She broke off both ends of the beans, snapped them in half, and tossed them into a deep wooden bowl. John followed suit. He had never before helped her with her work. The movements felt awkward but no more awkward than when he’d plowed his first row last year. The plow sat in the back of the barn during his visits, but Matthew saw him examining it and gave him a lesson. As he pushed, John had felt the dirt the plow was breaking through every limb; his whole body wobbled. He hadn’t understood how Matthew plowed so smoothly. Next to him, Marilla smiled slightly. Out of amusement or gratefulness, it didn’t matter.

You staying for dinner? she asked.

No, he said. My father wants me home.

She nodded. What did your father think about you running ice boats?

John bit his lower lip. He didn’t know, he said. He and Mother think I was visiting a friend in Nova Scotia. Elisabeth knew.

Marilla smiled widely. I bet she wanted to join you.
Yes. Ever since I told her about Norman’s wife, she wants to be the second woman iceboat runner. Did you know Norman’s wife used to vote, too? I don’t know how Elisabeth found that out. She’s been begging Father to let her vote for two years now.

During these arguments, his father’s face became a mixture of love and inarticulate anger. The only time he seemed incompetent. John laughed.

Why didn’t Elisabeth visit a friend in Nova Scotia, too? Marilla asked.

She has a fiancé now. She couldn’t lie to him. Well, I suppose she could, but he’d be more suspicious than Mother and Father.

Marilla nodded. She’d broken twice as many beans as him and for a moment he fell silent to catch up.

He’s a good man, John continued. Your father would like him. He’s a moderate Grit. All for bringing about Escheat through legislative means. He’s a lawyer, so he could make it happen. He wants to write the laws, not just talk about them.

Marilla noted that John could not talk and work at the same time, and smiled. She finished snapping the last few beans and stood to chop the onions and carrots.

He’s coming to visit. I’ll point him out to you. They’re getting married next year. I want father to pass the agenting duties on to him. He’d be a good agent. You know I don’t care enough about politics.

You sure talk a lot about them, Marilla said.

It’s all anyone talks about. At school, we had to write an essay: Argue the conservative or liberal stance on Escheat. I was the only one to argue the liberal side. I wrote what Norman says. Both Father and James were angry when they read it. I told them it was more challenging to argue the minority stance. That didn’t mean I agreed with it.
The chopped carrots filled the bowl like coins. She pushed a wisp of hair behind her ear. You should go, John. You don’t want to upset your father.

I’ll stop by this evening, he said.

Then he was gone. For a moment, she felt his presence next to her; saw his thin, large mouth; heard the babble of his voice. She wanted him to come back in the evening, yet she wondered if it were inappropriate that he assumed he’d be welcome. He was friends with Pa, Matthew, and Norman, she thought. She shouldn’t flatter herself that he came only to see her. After pouring the beans and carrots into the pot of stew on the hearth, she brought out a day-old loaf from the pantry and sliced it.

Wanting to prolong John’s voice in her head, Marilla went into the bedroom to read a letter.

She kept the six letters John had written her that winter in her mother’s old jewelry box. Half the size of a breadbox, a sliding panel in the front lifted to expose three drawers. The bottom one held her letters, the middle her mother’s jewelry, and the top Pa’s savings. Even though Matthew and Da would not be curious about, let alone try to read, the letters, it pleased her to keep them private.

Dear Marilla,

Twenty years old, and I’ve never been cold before. Frost coats my eyelids, I don’t feel my toes for hours at a time. I am writing you this from the ice. Because of the fog, we’ve halted the boats until night, which Norman predicts will be clear. To be warm, I must sit so close to the flames that I fear my trousers will catch on fire. Here there are no enclosed spaces to contain heat.

I was raised to believe that gentlemen such as my father and me, who use our minds, work harder than laborers. I haven’t decided whether this is true. On overcast or stormy days, such as today, to navigate properly, I must think harder than when studying and use my
muscles, too. On clear days, I yank the boat across the ice or mindlessly float along the streams in the company of Frenchmen and a few Scots who talk of drink and women and other crossings. Some days they bore me, because they know and care little to nothing of any world beyond their own.

But some days this kind of life seems sufficient. When the sky is blue there is no barrier between me and the horizon; it seems I could reach out and touch it. Or days like today, when I am coxswain, controlling the rudder. I don’t over-adjust like many novices. No one has had to teach me the repercussions of minor movements. The men don’t mind me steering because the ride is smooth. I like it because the differences between our roles has a purpose, beneficial to us both. I don’t need to listen to their versions of the world.

Nights in New Brunswick I sit at a bar table by a window and drink. Outside, men go to and from the brothel, their lantern light illuminating an arch around their bodies. Sometimes, when I’m at the bar in the late afternoon, I see the women walk across the snow to work. I like to watch them because their clothes are full of color. Even the amber of whiskey thrills me after a day or two on the ice. I think of the red raspberries we picked together, and the summer sea, and wonder why winter must be so white.

Maybe tonight won’t be clear, maybe we’ll have to sleep on the ice. I like this about being on the ice boats: Never knowing what will happen next, our actions subject as much to the weather as our own will. In the city, I say, I will do this or that today and, with very little complications, accomplish those tasks. Here, we must look up, down, and around us, plan our moves accordingly, and very often adjust or abandon our plans.

She liked to reread John’s iceboat adventures. She smiled at his dramatic statements. This summer I’ll talk to Father about us, he’d written in another letter. Forgive me for being a coward. Why would she think him a coward? It was natural he’d be scared to talk with his father. She didn’t ask it of him; if he decided against it, she’d
understand. Although she knew no one else she wanted to marry, she didn’t dare assume their association would end in marriage. If John mentioned this desire to his father, his father would probably send him to England.

She herself had labored over two letters to him, sent to his boarding school, not the Blythe’s townhouse. In them, she’d described events in her community: a new Presbyterian minister from Scotland, an outbreak of pneumonia that had killed a neighbor and forced Matthew to bed for a month, a shipment of tools, seeds, and household items from England in the early spring. She mentioned herself only in reference to new recipes she’d attempted. In both she asked after Elisabeth.

By the time she’d set the table, the rain had begun. A few stray drops splattered against the front windows and then the rain beat hard against the roof and ground. A chimney draft rippled the fire. She hoped the men had made it to the barn.

It was improper, Marilla knew, this association with John that most likely wouldn’t end in marriage. But she didn’t know when it began nor how to force an end. When and how had John shifted from their agent’s son to Matthew’s friend to the young man who, at times, seemed to know her so well? She had not sought him out, he had always been around her—on the lot, on their farm, in this small house and thus everywhere she turned. In deference to hospitality, she couldn’t deny him entrance. She could, she supposed, refuse to walk alone with him. But somehow these walks had became as much a seasonal event as harvest and to halt them would seem as wasteful and strange as allowing ripe vegetables to die on the vines.

Last summer, she and John had been walking along the shore when storm clouds gathered. They’d made it halfway back when the rain started. She’d led him to a cave where red rock hung over the sand. They sat inside, separately and silently, backing into the jagged rock wall as the heavy rain flew sideways toward them. At places
raindrops slipped around the lip of the cave, forming wet spots on the otherwise dry sand floor. John scooted forward and lifted his face to these drops. They fell onto his forehead and down his cheeks like tears. He laughed. Marilla followed his lead. It was humid, and the drops felt cool and refreshing. John crawled to her. He kissed the drops off her forehead and cheeks and then held her waist as he kissed the drops off her neck. His tongue coarse against her skin, his fingers more insistent than strong. By the time she’d kissed the drops off his face, the sun had come out. They turned their faces toward the cave’s opening. Steam rose off the ground. It smelled like sunlight mixed with rain.

As she stirred, steam rose from the kettle into Marilla’s face. Her eyes watered from the odor of onions. The stew smelled good. That afternoon in the cave had prompted her to refuse to walk with John for a couple of weeks. Because he still came to supper, they continued to be friendly, and she had begun, she didn’t remember when, to walk with him again.

In the anteroom, boots shuffled and voices murmured. Norman must be with them, she thought. Pa and Matthew took off their boots in silence.

They entered while she sat another place setting. Dust coated their brown loose shirts and trousers. The smell of their bodies mingled with the scent of stew. As usual, her father’s dark eyes were calm, her brother’s indecipherable. Norman’s eyes were fired up about something. He pulled at his beard. His small, round mouth hidden behind the whiskers. The smallest mouth that talks the loudest, John called it.

They sat down at the table. Marilla stacked the bowls on top of one another. When she went to take Norman’s bowl, he placed his thick fingers over it.

I’m not hungry, Norman said. But thank you.

I’ll dish up a small portion, Marilla said, and pulled the bowl away.
She considered his refusal almost a game. Norman ate whatever she placed in front of him. She looked at Da, who often laughed with her over Norman’s idiosyncrasies, but he was looking toward the hearth’s mantel, at the Scottish clock, its glass face clouded by steam. Marilla took the stacked bowls to the hearth and ladled in stew.

Hugh feared the steam might warp the clock’s wood. Yesterday, when they were storing barrels of apples in the barn loft, Marilla had found the clock and brought it inside. Hugh went over, picked it up, and placed it on a shelf built into the wall on the other side of the room. Too deep for the shelf, the clock’s bottom hung over the edge. As a child in Scotland, Hugh had taught himself roman numerals from the clock’s face. Clara, his deceased wife, had placed it in a chest years ago, when a spring had broken.

Norman took bites in quick succession, and then laid down his spoon for a minute and looked around. He always ate like this, but usually talking, not silence, punctuated his rests.

Where are you headed? Hugh asked Norman.

Let’s go to the barn after dinner, Norman said. He glanced at Marilla. I might make a good offer for that horse of yours.

So, he didn’t want her to know, Hugh thought. He didn’t know why. She was discrete. Still, the fewer people who knew the better. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and cleared his throat.

I’m not selling you my horse, Hugh said.

Maybe I’m a rich man, Norman said.

She’s not for sale, Hugh said.

Norman laughed, his whole body shaking. You think I don’t know that? I only want to admire her.
Hugh nodded. He worked a stringy piece of the roast out of his teeth with his tongue. There were other things Norman should know by now that he didn’t. That Hugh would never refuse to pay rent. That he would never use violence to get what he wanted. Hugh’s father had signed an agreement with Cecil Jacobs that stated that the Cuthberts could buy their land after twenty years of tenantry. Yes, the agreement had been made thirty years ago, but Hugh had faith in it. These things took longer than stated. Norman, born in the new world and of an impatient disposition, didn’t understand that.

The path ran past the vegetable garden to the barn. The sky had cleared, mud on the path the only evidence of the midday storm. Hugh followed Norman, stepping into the man’s boot prints so they wouldn’t mar more of the path than necessary. He thought about the innumerable walks he and Norman had taken on the lot, not so much recently as when they were young men, when Norman had taught him about the land. Too sincerely inquisitive to mind Norman’s pride, Hugh had noted what had been planted where, the best places for finding mushrooms, the names and uses of plants and berries foreign to him.

Upon entering the barn, Norman didn’t stop at the horse’s stall but climbed the steep stairs to the loft. Hugh followed him up the stairs and to the window, where Norman stood looking at the dark blue sea. On the beach, a small child spun in circles while a woman, his mother, walked ahead of him. The men stood shoulder to shoulder, Hugh’s head reaching Norman’s neck. Because of Hugh’s stockiness and solid presence, if the men stood more than five feet away from each other, they seemed the same height.

Unlike when he’d first moved to the new world, the sea no longer held Hugh’s interest. He looked at the barrels of apples on the far side of the loft. He crossed his
arms and eyed the floor, confirming that they had left enough space for the bags of potatoes.

Norman turned to him. Can I stay up here? he asked.

No, Hugh said. You can’t.

Norman turned back to the window.

You’re welcome to eat with us, Hugh said. You can hold Escheat meetings in my house. But you can’t live up here. It might endanger the children.

Norman tapped his foot. Hugh felt his friend’s disgust. Not that Hugh wouldn’t allow Norman to stay but that Hugh feared something, anything, but especially Charles Blythe, his agent, authority. Well, Norman didn’t have children. Although Marilla and Matthew viewed Norman as a second father and even, oddly, as a mother.

For months after Clara died, Hugh had taken long solitary walks in the evenings. The evenings had been the times, before Clara became sick, that he and his wife had worked next to one another. A candle lit between them, she sewing in her rocking chair, he whittling or fixing a tool or weaving baskets on a stool across from her. The space between their chairs more or less depending on the season and their moods. Even after the outset of her illness, he sat on the stool next to the bed. He wasn’t accustomed to evenings without her. In moments of honesty, he admitted that for months and even years she had exaggerated her illness and shirked her duties to the household and the children. On some evenings toward the end, some evenings the space between them grew until he placed his stool on the opposite side of the bedroom and leaned against the wall. Once, he’d wished she’d already died. But on those walks after her death, he’d thought of their earlier evenings together, of her charm and passion, which, whether or not sincere or long-lived, never failed to attract him. Often, while he walked, Norman watched over the children at the house. Hugh felt self-indulgent, even more so because
Norman, whose wife had died the year before his, had not seemed to experience grief. Hugh came home to hear Norman telling Marilla of his encounter with a bear or a lynx or teaching Matthew how to tie knots. Hugh never voiced his gratitude for Norman’s presence, but those months had deepened and secured a friendship that a difference in personality or politics could never unravel.


They are, Hugh said. An accusation. He stepped away from his friend and looked out the window on the adjacent wall. He watched Matthew walking toward the fields. Hugh remembered last summer, John as Matthew’s shadow, the agent’s son’s head always turned his son, while Matthew walked looking straight ahead. John’s hands whirring as he talked. He remembered many summers ago, when Charles came to the Cuthbert house, very angry after discovering Elisabeth had taught Marilla to read. Hugh had sat him down and agreed, both about the impropriety and the impracticality of Elisabeth’s visits. Charles, immediately relieved, spoke instead of the wheat crop. Their agent’s anger rose and fell quickly, like a boy’s.

And John, Norman said. Is courting Marilla.

Hugh looked over at his friend. Hands in pockets, shoulders hunched in disgust, firm and insolent little lips, always ready to spew forth insubordination. Hugh tried to think of times John and Marilla had talked but could not. In his mind’s eye, John spoke to Matthew. Was the boy courting Marilla? If he wanted to learn about farming, fine, but he must be more intelligent than to attempt that.

John and Charles stepped into Hugh’s sightline. The son and father walked with an arm’s length between their shoulders, John looking at the ground, Charles at the Cuthbert house. For every three steps of Charles’s, John took five. Some boys were men at twenty-one, Hugh thought. John was not. Half-a-man, perhaps.
Stay here, Hugh said. Charles and John are coming.

Norman stepped over to join Hugh at his window. Bastard, he said. Teaching his son the dirty work.

Hugh climbed down the stairs, hand on a wall. He paused at his horse’s stall. He went inside and fed her a piece of sugar. He stroked her head with one hand as her lips moved gratefully around his other palm. Norman’s not taking you anywhere, he said. He left the stall and latched it.

Better hurry, Norman called from above. Your boss is waiting.

Hugh shook his head as he exited the barn. To Norman, gratifying a boss’ demands was the ultimate humiliation. Hugh had fought Norman once before, when they were young men, in a tavern, and Norman had defended Frenchmen. He had invited them over to their table, insisted they all talk politics, and allowed the Frenchmen to babble their incoherent nonsense. When Hugh tried to leave, Norman had confronted him, and when Hugh said the Frenchmen were scum, Norman had swung at him. Hugh punched Norman, once, hard, and left, as he’d intended to do. This was not the time for any of that. Hugh stepped steadily toward the house. He wondered why Charles was doing rounds now, when most men would be in the fields.

Inside, John and Charles turned as Hugh opened the door. They hadn’t yet sat down. Marilla stood over the hearth, boiling water for tea.

Good afternoon, Charles, Hugh said. John. Please sit down. He pulled out a chair and sat and they did the same.

John studied grain of the wood in the table. Hugh looked back and forth between him and Marilla.

How is the farm, Hugh? Charles asked.

Doing well, Hugh said. A good amount of rain this summer.
As Charles and Hugh talked, Marilla poured steaming water from the tea kettle into the white porcelain teapot, a heirloom she only used on formal occasions. Out of the corner of his eye, Hugh watched John watching her. He couldn’t tell whether the boy was scrutinizing Marilla or the process. After tea water steeped, Marilla poured all three men tea and brought out a baked apple dish from the pantry. Neither Charles nor Hugh wanted any, but John accepted a slice. Marilla went into the bedroom in the back.

Charles said they’d come to collect rent. At this statement, the boy put down his fork. He nodded, his serious face attempting to mimic his father’s. Hugh, surprised, didn’t reply. It was the first time the agent himself had asked for the rent from him directly, not by proxy. The boy went back to eating. Hugh said he’d get the rent money.

In the bedroom, Marilla was stripping sheets off the beds. He walked past her to the jewelry box. He slid off the front panel and opened the top drawer, where he kept his money. He felt Marilla pause behind him.

They came for rent, he said, his back to her.

She didn’t reply. She moved around again behind him. He counted out the bills and slid the wood paneling into place. The box made him think of Clara. How her parents said as a girl she’d carried it on her lap the entire passage from Scotland. How she always wore one piece of jewelry from it, even when she was bedridden. Other women thought her decorating herself a luxury if not a sin. Hugh knew it was more out of memory than vanity that she wore a bracelet or necklace or ring. A physical reminder of home.

Charles stopped talking to John when Hugh entered. The boy had finished his slice of pie. Both his hands clutched the edge of the table as though he wanted to push his chair back and leave. Hugh sat down and counted out the bills.
Do you know when I’ll be able to buy this land? Hugh said. It seemed a natural question when pushing his money across the table. He had asked the rent collector this but never Charles.

Charles hesitated. No, I don’t, he said. And then, because he liked Hugh: If Cecil sells now, it’ll seem as though he’s giving in to the Escheaters.

He’d be fulfilling a contract, Hugh said quietly. That’s all.

Escheaters will look on it as a victory and will expect other victories.

My father made the contract before they coined the word Escheat, Hugh said. Fulfilling the contract is one thing, Escheat another.

Charles shook his head. Others wouldn’t know that, he said.

I’d make sure they knew it, Hugh said. He was surprised he could say this much.

I want my family to own land. That’s all.

The Cuthberts had been tenants in Scotland as well. Once, as a young man, when Hugh had been walking along the tame beauty of the Island’s low, red shores, thinking of the fierce beauty of Scotland’s high, dark cliffs, his father had found him. He put a hand on Hugh’s shoulder, and they both looked toward Scotland together. It was the only time Hugh remembered his father touching him, and the only time Hugh felt this longing in his father. We’re here because we’ll be able to own our own land, his father had said. They had turned from the sea to look at the line of the pine forest, which they’d clear, year by year, to create farmland, use as firewood, or sell to shipbuilders. That conversation had taken place twenty-five years ago.

You’ve voted for candidates who support Escheat, Charles said.

That’s true, Hugh said. But I know as well as you that ultimately it’s every man for himself.
Grasping his empty cup, Charles squinted across the table at Hugh. No, he didn’t believe that. At the end of each day, he would have accomplished less if Anna hadn’t been there to encourage and challenge him. And then there was Cecil and a half-dozen men in Charlottetown who were integral to his work. It was a bleaker view than Norman’s, Charles thought, although this man wasn’t half as aggressive.

Marilla stepped forward. Would you like more tea? she asked Charles.

No, thank you, Charles said. We have a dozen more farms to visit.

Hugh clasped his callused fingers together. His thick eyebrows moved up and down, as though they were trying to say what his mouth couldn’t. When do you expect Mr. Jacobs to sell this land? he asked.

Charles moved his jaw back and forth, considering. He expected the landlord to sell it to him within the next few years. Then, he supposed, he might sell portions to Hugh, and to a couple other long-term tenants. Within the next few years, he said.

Even if Escheat continues? Hugh asked.

Yes, Charles said. Let’s go, John.

Hugh watched John, who had been staring at the unlit hearth as though a stash of money were hidden under the ash.

Good afternoon, Mr. Cuthbert, John said. He nodded at Hugh as he stood. His eyes swept past Marilla and he turned his body away.

Leave your boy so we can talk, Hugh wanted to say. About Marilla. About this land. Instead, he walked them to the door.

Marilla was clearing the tea cups from the table. Marilla, Hugh said. He wanted to ask her about her relationship with John.
She paused, one hand holding the teapot’s handle, the other cradling its bottom. Her body at the counter while her head turned toward her father. No secrecy in her dark eyes.

We’ll own this land within five years, he said. This was the tone of voice you used with children, Hugh thought, as though you knew things you only hoped. Marilla was no longer a child, he knew, and this tone hadn’t fooled her even when she was one.

I hope so, she said. She glanced inside the teapot and, after rinsing it out, went and put it in the cupboard.

A screech and deep-voiced yell came from outside. Hugh hurried through the anteroom and Marilla followed and closed the door after them. Across the yard, beneath the barn, Charles stood, looking up and yelling. John stood ahead and apart from his father, arms crossed. Something flew from the barn window as Hugh and Marilla approached.

You should have left already, Charles said.

It’s not evening yet, Norman said. An apple smashed at Charles’s feet.

You have an upstanding friend, here.

Yes, Norman said. An apple bounced off Charles’s shoulder.

He abides by the law.

Too bad, isn’t it?

Do you want to compromise his situation?

Norman laughed. What could you do? he asked. You have no cause to evict him.

You give me cause.

Not legally, Norman said. An apple bounced off Charles’ other shoulder.

Hugh motioned to Marilla with his head. At this point he could do little to nothing to stop Norman. Charles wouldn’t want to be seen humiliated.
He is a renter. I don’t need a legal cause.

Marilla turned and went. She sensed John watching her. He was not good at keeping secrets. Walking on the tips of her boots, she stepped over puddles. They had gotten muddy as she ran out.

Get off the Cuthbert’s land, Norman said.

This is Cecil Jacobs’s land, Charles said. And it will be my land before it becomes Hugh’s. Charles turned to go. A bruised apple smashed against his back. He kept an even stride. Come along, John.

At the rate apples bounced off Charles’ back, it seemed to him there must be at least three men throwing them. They were hard and each hit painful. He imagined the future bruises that would form. A few steps later, chest-high grass shielded him against the bombardment. Charles put a hand on John’s shoulder. If he comes near our house, I’ll shoot him, he said calmly. His shaking hand vibrated against John’s back.

Norman dragged the barrel of apples back to the other side of the loft. He swiped one and took a bite. The sweet taste satiated him. Chuckling and munching on the apple, he descended the stairs. He grabbed a wooden slop bucket and went outside to assess the damage. The manure mingled with mud. Apples lay whole or smashed into the ground and mud or, farther on, in the grass. He counted the ruined apples while he tossed them in the slop bucket. Twenty-two. He intended to compensate Hugh from his own supply.
Two weeks after Charles evicted Norman, Charles stopped at his former tenant’s farm on his morning ride. He put up his horse in the empty barn. The horse shook his head at the unfamiliar stall, and Charles stroked him until he calmed. In the barnyard, crusty slop lined the bottom of the pigs’ trough. A milking pail hung on the wall. To Charles, the silence seemed indeterminate. The place could have been deserted a month or five years.

Near the house, potatoes had been planted around tree stumps. The potato roots had grown out of the ground, exposing potatoes, because no one had humped them over with soil. Charles shook his head. He couldn’t imagine allowing his own land to fall into such disarray. Guests were coming out in a week, for his daughter’s engagement party. He planned to take his friends on a tour of the land, showing off the crops and the tenants, who, for the most part, liked him. He wanted every farm to be orderly.

In the barn, he found a shovel in one of the deserted stalls. Back at the potatoes, he looked around. Satisfied he was alone, he dug his shovel into the ground, raised it up, and tossed dirt over the potato plants. He finished circling one stump, then two. Sweating, he paused to rest. Already, the birds had fallen silent. It would be a hot day, more like summer than autumn.

On his way out the door, Charles had heard Elisabeth’s laughter coming from the sitting room. Following it, he’d found her and James drinking tea. They woke early in order to lengthen the day and thus the time they spent together. Charles was satisfied with the match. Elisabeth was happy, and James came from a good family. A tad too liberal for Charles’s persuasion, but knowing Elisabeth, he was just thankful she hadn’t run off with a tenant. In the last couple years, he’d wondered if it were more difficult to deal with her or Norman McLean.
Charles finished the remaining dozen stumps in one burst of energy. Huffing and sweating, he leaned against his shovel and looked at the wheat fields, golden and ripe for harvest. Above and beyond them the light blue sky merged with the deeper blue sea. Wisps of clouds moved across the edge of the horizon. He walked to the edge of the field and punctured a grain with his thumbnail. He wouldn’t let this grain be wasted. He stalked back to the barn, returned the shovel, retrieved his horse, and rode on toward the Cuthbert place.

He encountered the Cuthbert girl between the barn and the house. She carried a basket of eggs. She looked almost like a woman now, like her mother, only she held herself straighter. She halted and nodded at him.

Your father around? he asked.

He’s in the field, she said. Cutting wheat.

I need to speak to him, he said.

I’ll give him your message, she said.

I’ll find him.

Let me put up your horse.

Marilla stepped to the porch, where she set her basket, and then walked back toward Charles, who had dismounted and held his horse’s reigns. As she took them, she wondered how she could stall him. John, too, was cutting wheat in the field. She had served a breakfast of pork and egg pie to Da, Matthew, Thorburn, David Owen, and John so early that, even to her, it felt like night. It had been cool then, almost cold, and when she’d opened the door for John she’d seen his breath. Soon, John would leave the fields for his own family’s breakfast. But she had nothing to say to Charles. He thought himself beneficent and lenient. When she thought of him at all, she thought
him conflicted and compromised. He attempted to satisfy the tenants, Cecil Jacobs, and himself, and ended up pleasing no one. His collar seemed wet with sweat.

Hot this morning, she said.

Yes, he said.

I’ll fetch you some water.

No, he said and turned and walked away.

She wondered whether she’d offended him. She was almost as indifferent to what Charles thought as Norman, but she had different desires and a quieter nature, so her indifference was less evident.

After securing the horse in a stall and emptying eggs from the basket, Marilla went to the garden. It was the height of winter squash season, and some of the vines grew up to her thigh. She squatted down and, taking her knife from her basket, cut through the vine as close to the stem of the squash as possible. She placed the cut squash in her basket and turned her body in another direction to find another ripe squash. When she had cut all the ripe squash within an arms length, she stood up, took a few steps into the vines, squatted down, and again searched. Her hands were calloused and tan, like every October, and she unconsciously hummed while she worked.

After, and even before, Ma died, Marilla had taught herself housekeeping. Before that Pa had kept up the garden, best he could, and neighbor women had given the family soap or an occasional loaf of bread. Many thought Ma was lazy and shirked her duties, but this consensus wasn’t a judgment and didn’t preclude assistance. When Marilla took over, the women gave her hints. This bread is a little dense, dear, or Your squash will choke out your tomatoes if you plant them that close together. Some were more subtle: an exchange of glances over the supper table, clucking when examining
the inseam of a dress. Marilla took note, and learned. She didn’t desire, or even imagine, her daily life as anything but what it was. She’d known deep loss before she was old enough to articulate it as loss, and as she’d come into a love for the objects, people, and work around her, she’d made her own peace. Some tasks, such as washing clothes, she disliked, but others, such as gardening, sewing, and cooking, satisfied her. Now, when neighbor women called, they whispered praise at her kitchen’s cleanliness. This pleased her.

On her way into the house, she passed the cart on which she and the other neighbor women would load food and beer and push out to the field at dinner-time. They would rest under the shade of a tree near the half-shorn field, amid the smell of cut wheat, and drink and eat and reminisce about other harvests. If Norman were there, he would tell about the year that hail had wiped out the crop or the year that, between harvests and harvest parties, he and Hugh went three entire days and nights without sleeping. But Norman probably wouldn’t be around; they hadn’t seen him since his eviction. Tomorrow, they would either finish cutting their wheat field or begin on the neighboring one. And thus it would continue for the upcoming week or two.

At the storage barn, Charles crossed the road and walked along the edge of the wheat field. He rolled his shoulders back and forth and felt the remnants of remaining bruises. He frowned. If he didn’t trust Hugh, he’d search the barn for Norman now. But he did trust Hugh, enough to deceive him without fearing repercussions. To a fault, Hugh was loyal to this land and to him. Dust clouds formed behind Charles’ ungentle step, and every so often, he stopped and sneezed, in quick succession, four or five times in a row. Every year, he had these sneezing attacks when he came to the country. He disliked them, less for the discomfort than that they made him look undignified.
He rounded the edge of the field. Five men worked more than halfway down a row. He squinted against the sun. The sweat that had dried while talking to Marilla had returned. The ends of his mustache were wet. Ahead of him, three men cut the wheat with scythes while two walked behind the cutters, gathering the cut wheat and, with stray wisps, bounding it into bundles. Already sweat had darkened the back of the trailers’ cream-colored shirts. One of the trailers was Matthew and, as Charles neared, he realized the other was John. Charles unconsciously halted.

John, wearing brown hemp trousers, leaned over awkwardly, barely bending his knees, while Matthew squatted before he tied a bundle. His son’s movements seemed purposeful and energetic, more so than Charles had seen. He crossed his arms and waited for his breathing to slow to normal.

All five men worked with their backs to him. He could leave, pretending he hadn’t seen his son, and no one would know. Instead, he walked across the shorn section of the field, over stray wheat stalks, up to the side of the men, and waited. Matthew saw him first and then Hugh, who paused the swing of his scythe, and then David Owen and Thorburn froze too. John, intent on a knot, saw him last. When Charles noted his son’s instantly pale face, he was both proud and irritated that his son feared him.

Go home, Charles said.

John dropped his bundle of wheat. The knot didn’t hold; the bundle scattered on the ground and over his boots. After shaking them out, one by one, he turned and walked toward the road. Charles thought an upward tilt of his son’s chin hinted at contrariness, but John didn’t turn around or speak.
Hugh greeted Charles while his agent watched John walk away. Charles’s small eyes had widened, in surprise or anger, Hugh didn’t know. He offered no explanation for John’s presence with them. If Charles questioned him, he would answer.

I rode past Norman McLean’s fields, Charles said. His wheat field is ready for harvest. He wanted to begin with his original purpose. That the tenant he trusted most had appeared to betray him he would sort out later.

Yes, sir, Hugh said. It is. He looked into his agent’s eyes.

Do you intend to harvest it?

Yes, sir, we do.

Norman seems to have wanted it to go to seed.

Hugh did not remind Charles that he’d forbidden Norman to be anywhere on the lot.

We will split the profits as usual, Charles said. I’d keep his share for yourself.

We’ll get to his fields within three days, Hugh said. He tightened his grip on the scythe. He had no intention of keeping any of Norman’s profits.

Fine, Charles said. He sneezed three times and re-straightened his shoulders.

Now. How many years has my son worked the wheat harvest?

This is his first one, sir, Hugh said. The year before John had harvested flax and oats and for years before that he had watched the farmers. If asked, Hugh would tell Charles these facts.

This was his idea, not yours?

Yes, sir.

Very good. I’ll let you get back to work. Good morning.

Good morning.
David Owen sat down his scythe and stood beside Matthew. Hugh and Thorburn began to cut the wheat. While Charles watched, David bunched together wheat while squatting down, as his son had not learned to do. None of the men spoke, and Charles doubted they would discuss him, or the incident, after he left. It was not their way. He turned, dabbed his nose with his handkerchief, walked to the road, and headed home.

Inside, Charles went straight to his office, approaching John from behind. John sat, his head turned to examine the books in the built-in bookcase. He still wore the clothes he’d worn in the field. Where the devil he’d gotten them, Charles didn’t know. Charles stood at the doorway until John turned. Dirt ringed the boy’s flushed face, as though he’d splashed water on it but not scrubbed it. Go clean up, Charles said. Change your clothes. The boy lifted the bottom of his shirt and examined the hem, as though he too were surprised he hadn’t changed. He left the room.

Charles opened a desk drawer, took out a flask, and poured brandy into a clear round glass. He sipped it and looked out the window, across a grass-choked field to the sea. His father had had tenants clear a pine tree grove off this particular land to open up the view. The weaker part of his personality wished he always could command John, as he had just done, twice that morning, and the boy would obey.

He thought about the happiest journey in his life, when he and his friends had gone to England as young men. After years of schooling, they travelled alone and answered to no one. They drank all night on the deck of the ship, and at the first light threw up over the railing and went to bed. They took weeklong excursions into Scotland or the English countryside, and when they become tired of the wanderer’s life and entered society, everyone viewed them as fresh and exotic because they were from the new world. At one dance, Charles’s stories of the Island’s red roads, plentiful ponds,
and ubiquitous horizon had charmed Anna. A year later, he had brought her, married, back to the Island and settled down. And as much as he loved Anna and their life together, he also loved traveling to New Brunswick or Nova Scotia for politics or to England for business. He had offered John a trip abroad, and John had refused. Why? So he could waste his youth cutting wheat with tenant farmers? His son had been around tenants enough that he had no reason to romanticize the life they led. Those men worked hard and died young. Travel, on the other hand, promised adventure and variety and delivered on that promise.

John walked through the doorway. Their maid, Eleanor, stepped inside behind him. Would you like your breakfasts brought up here, sir? she asked.

Charles glanced at the brandy glass he still held and then at the grandfather clock in the room’s corner. It was 9:30. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a drink before dinner.

Yes, Eleanor, he said. He sat his glass down at the same time John sat down, across from him. One smear of dirt remained on John’s cheek. Charles blinked deliberately and waved his hand as though these gestures would remove it. Explain, he said.

John grasped the edge of the desk and looked over his father’s shoulder, out the window. He admired his father’s restraint. He did not accuse him or yell at him, as he might have done, as he had done, in fact, when he found John building bonfires with their French hired hand when he was ten. John dropped his hands into his lap and looked into his father’s face. I’d like to own some land, he said.

This son, who had seemed so different from him, suddenly seemed similar. I would too, Charles said. I plan to discuss the matter with Cecil Jacobs in England next.
summer. I hope to buy this lot from him. John was the first person with whom he had shared his plan.

I want to buy land to farm on, John said.

That would be a gamble, Charles said, not an investment.

Eleanor entered and unloaded from her tray two plates of biscuits and an egg and potato hash and two full teacups. Charles nodded at her and she left. John scooted up to the desk, picked up a fork, and dove into the hash. For some reason, his son’s relish for food offended Charles.

You know that the tenants survive as farmers only because they are tenants, Charles said. They wouldn’t know how to do the business of farming without us.

John didn’t think this true. But he didn’t want to be waylaid by Escheat talk. What does that matter to me? he asked, his mouth full. I have learned both the business and the labor sides of farming.

Charles shook his head. One man should not do both, he said. The system works well because the tenants do what they know how to do and we do what we know how to do.

Maybe this was true, John thought. But other, possibly better, ways to farm existed, too. The Island was one of the last holdouts of feudalism. The rest of the world couldn’t be completely wrong, John swallowed. I know both sides, he repeated.

You’re twenty-one years old, Charles said. You can’t truly know either one.

It upset Charles that John showed no interest in owning this lot. The boy had not even responded to Charles’ confidence in the matter. His was a youthful and selfish attitude, Charles thought, that one could work only for oneself and eschew responsibility toward others. Working alone might be viable when young, but
managing others would provide John with challenges and satisfactions and assist his growth into maturity.

Land is being sold up north, John said. Off lot 34 and 35.

So I’ve heard, Charles said. He broke his biscuit in half and took a bite without looking away from his son.

Would you be willing to give me the money you would have given me to go abroad so I can buy a few acres? John asked. He shoveled in three more forkfuls, and chewing furiously, while looking down at his plate.

The biscuit settled on Charles’s tongue until it became soggy. He thought about the story of the prodigal son. How John might squander his inheritance. During other summers, John had seemed like the elder brother in the parable, attending to his father and the business of the land. And so every man is, Charles thought as he swallowed, part prodigal and part elder brother, one or the other personality more or less paramount, depending. Charles couldn’t remember which son was laudable or if they both had disgraced their father, each differently. He took a sip of tea, now lukewarm.

How many acres? Charles asked.

John looked up. Twenty, he said.

Charles took another bite of the biscuit, considering. John wouldn’t squander his inheritance, only money Charles had sat aside so his son could experience the world. His son had indirectly compared his proposal to going abroad. And so it might be, Charles thought. A period to explore a different place, to understand his own role in the world more clearly. Again, Charles experienced an affinity with his son’s desires. John didn’t want to stay away, he simply wanted to travel somewhere Charles himself hadn’t gone. John didn’t want to adopt a different way of life, he only wanted to participate in a youthful experiment.
And you would go live there, alone? Charles asked.

No, John thought. With Marilla. Yes, he said.

John, finished eating, put down his fork. During all his secret visits to the Cuthberts, he had been unconsciously deducing what he had realized on the ice boats for the first time—that a middle ground existed between Hugh’s silence and obedience and Norman’s rabble-rousing and rebellion, a way of silence and rebellion, of planned evasiveness.

And if you happened to make profits, Charles said, they’d belong to me.

No, John thought. I won’t be your tenant. What if I won money gambling abroad? he asked. Would you require I give you that money?

Charles smiled in condescension. At least you know this is a gamble. You won’t make a profit in two years, anyway.

Two years?

I will give you the money, Charles said. After Elisabeth’s engagement party, you can leave. You will buy land and will work two years on it. You will write letters to your mother and me, as though you’re abroad. I don’t want to see you here or in Charlottetown. After two years, I assume, you will be happy to become an agent.

We will talk about that in two years, John thought.

Charles sensed his own resolve in his son’s pulled back posture and lifted his eyebrows. You will come back, he said, defensively, as though he suspected otherwise. You are foolish if you think a few weeks of harvest have prepared you for a farmer’s life.

I don’t, John said, although he sometimes did. I’ll learn.

Meanwhile, no more working alongside tenants, Charles said. There are tenant farmers and landowner farmers. You will be of the latter class.
Yes, sir, John said. He averted his eyes from his father’s and relaxed his torso, suddenly very tired. I will not work with them again.

John rolled his shoulder back and forth as he walked from his father’s office. His suit jacket confined his limbs. He would be sore from the morning’s work. He felt defeated when he should have felt elated. He had asked his father for land because he was scared to ask about Marilla. In that matter, his father would not relent. Well, his father would not know about her then.

Charles substituted more brandy for tea. He had already started drinking, he might as well continue. The field out his window looked a lighter green now, exposed fully to the sun, not as in the early morning, shaded and darkened. The light of the sun itself seemed subdued, a sign that autumn was here. After all these years of worrying Elisabeth would disgrace him, Charles thought, she would soon be married and settled, and he had now agreed to John’s plan, a plan which would seem amusing if not laughable to everyone in his social circle. Well, there was no need to tell them about it yet.

Norman arrived in the heat of the day. Marilla sat on a chair under the shade of the oak tree, patching a pair of Matthew’s trousers. Shoulders straight, head bent, elbows close to her sides, mouth open in concentration. For a couple hours the house would be hotter than outside and then it would acquire the evening air and cool down. Her sedate and peaceful pose aligned with the stillness of autumn, the immobile leaves, a hidden one, here or there, lined in orange or red or yellow. The corner of her eye caught Norman when he was a ways down the road, but she didn’t look up. It was his way to drop by any time of the day or night. She would have been startled if it happened otherwise.
Shouldn’t you be helping with the harvest? Norman teased as he dismounted. His face seemed more tan than when she’d last seen him, his hair lighter, beard longer.

Sometimes she did, when they needed to get the crop in before a storm or if there weren’t enough neighbors to help. Not if they want to eat, she said. Standing up, she hung the trousers over her arm. Shouldn’t you? she asked.

I should, Norman said, seriously. He rested a hand on his hip, the other held the reins. I haven’t been so irresponsible since I was a boy.

They should almost be done for the day, Marilla said. She laid the trousers over the back of the chair. You can bring them in for supper.

I will. And I hope you can spare a few bites. I have been working, just not here.

Certainly, Marilla said. Then, as he turned with his horse, Let me take him. I need to do the milking.

She placed Norman’s horse in their only empty stall, next to Charles’s horse. She was surprised Charles had forgotten his horse and even more surprised he had not sent someone to get him. She wondered if something were wrong. At dinner, Da had not mentioned whether Charles had seen John, and it wasn’t her place to ask. Da had seemed preoccupied, not willing to converse, or even to listen to the neighbors’ talk. As she squeezed the cow’s warm teats, milk dribbling into the pail, her hands steady and relaxed in the familiar task, she decided to take the horse back to the Blythe’s, as soon as she could leave unnoticed. Who knows what Norman would do if he got ahold of him.

Outside, she stopped at the pigpen and, in the fading light, saw Mort, a pig leaning against the barn wall. He had become so heavy it was an effort for him to carry his belly to the trough and back. What a good load of pork they’d have that winter. Hello, Mort, she said, childlike, before she exited the barn, to assume the role of the woman of the house. The barn animals had been her first friends. She had named and
loved pigs, hens, sheep, and cattle for a few seasons or years before the men slaughtered them. She had then salted, spiced, or smoked them, as needed. Marilla had introduced the animals to Elisabeth, and when she told her they’d soon be killed, Elisabeth had pointed to a particularly pink, nimble pig and said, Even him? The animals’ relatively brief life had never seemed strange or sad to Marilla, just in the course of things, the way the world worked.

In the house, a newspaper, *The Royal Gazette*, sat on the counter. Norman must have dropped it off before he went to the fields. Marilla didn’t glance at the headlines as she walked past. Unless politics related directly to her family, she had no interest in them. And she’d learn about those politics from hearsay, not from a paper. She took the ball of dough from underneath the cloth where she’d left it to rise and divided it in half. Her thumbs pressed into it, forming a smooth crust. She thought of Mrs. Thorburn and Mrs. Owen. Usually they would be here, and the three of them would make supper and wait for the men. But ever since Norman’s eviction, the tenants had feared large gatherings, lest they be accused of plotting or rebellion. Especially in their house, where John Blythe was a frequent guest. When the women hadn’t come for dinner, Marilla knew not expect them for supper. She fitted the crust into a clay pie platter, poured in it the last of the blueberries, fitted a crust covering over the berries, cut air slits in the top with a knife, and placed the platter on a shelf over the open fire. She reminded herself to check the cranberry bog in the morning. Most likely it would be a couple of weeks before harvest, but they seemed to be ripening early this year. She then took out the red and white china, saved for festive occasions, and sat the table for supper. Norman was here, and it was a good harvest. That seemed occasion enough.

After Elisabeth stopped coming to the Cuthberts, Marilla continued to read. After Sunday dinners, she would take down her family’s Bible, the only book in the
house, and find the scriptures the pastor had preached on that day. Her mother would have chided such work on Sundays. Her father, disabled by grief, forgot Marilla’s existence half of the time. She identified each word in a sentence and then read the sentence as a whole. It was helpful that she already knew what the passage was about. Soon, she was competent enough to read without relying on the sermon—the war stories in the Old Testament, the song-like Psalms, and Jesus’s parables, her favorites.

At the time, some of his instructions seemed self-evident, but like any child, she thrived on repetition and familiarity, so she didn’t mind their apparent simplicity. No farmer would throw their seed onto a path or rocky soil, Norman told her, when she read aloud the parable of the sower. Marilla knew this, but liked to be reminded anyway. Perhaps an agent would, she said, seriously, and Norman laughed. It was that evening that he’d asked her to teach him to read.

All that winter, before he went iceboating and on his visits home from the ice, she instructed him. They sat next to one another at the table, the Bible between them, Norman waiting for Marilla’s instruction, for an hour or two the instructed instead of the instructor. She opened to Psalms they had heard all their lives, made him point out certain words, and then made him find these words other places in the Bible. Matthew was underfoot during these sessions and, when he started to bring the newspaper into the house, Marilla realized he’d learned to read as well, and more quickly than she or Norman. He never read aloud, except to report to Da the price on certain seed. After Norman learned to read, he’d read The Royal Gazette aloud in any gathering, to as many people as would listen. He offered to teach other men to read, but none of them were interested. A few of the women sent their children his way, but he had no patience with them. And so he remained the only man on the lot who could read, and this knowledge
heightened the other tenant’s respect for him, as well as confirmed his almost mythical status.

Norman found the men sitting on the ground at angles toward one another, arms crossed over their chest or elbows straight, holding up their bodies, resting before they walked home. Sickles in the dirt beside them, bundles of wheat scattered across the field behind them, the sky above them vying between dark blue and black. They greeted him without surprise. He loaded the sickles into the cart and they stood. When he grasped the handles to pull it from the field, they joined him. They moved slowly and loosely, their well-earned end-of-the-day languor as familiar to Norman as the tiredness creasing their faces, the color of their eyes, their distinctive body movements. Matthew, he noted, had grown out of his occasional boyish jerkiness and acquired Hugh’s absolute steadiness. When Matthew took one handle, Norman shifted over to hold only the other one. The cart weighed next to nothing but he appreciated the young man’s gesture. In a couple days they would load the bundled wheat into the cart and take trips to and from the barn, where they would store it until the cooler nights arrived, ideal for winnowing. David Owen began a harvest hymn and the others joined in. As their voices faded, Norman began a new tune: They rest, and feed, and bray out ‘loyalty:’ perverted word — the sons of men, are loyal only to their gain. But loyalty’s a Cuckoo song, used to delude the vulgar throng.

None of the others knew the song. When they crossed the road, David looked back and forth, as though hoping no one would see or hear them. By the time Norman had finished, they’d reached the storage barn. Hugh invited the men for supper, but they said no, their wives would be waiting. He noted Norman’s angry eyes and scrunched face. His friend knew they were afraid to gather. Well, they wanted to keep
their farms. Hugh confirmed that he and Matthew would be at the Thorburn’s place well before dawn, and the men left. Matthew excused himself to the horse barn, and Hugh lit three lamps, hung them on posts, and began shucking corn.

Norman helped him. While standing on the winnowing floor, they dipped their hands into the wooden storage bin, dished out an ear, ripped off the husk, and tossed the shucked ear into another storage bin. Only Hugh would turn to this task after a full day in the field, Norman thought. It was his way of slowing down into the evening. His friend couldn’t start or stop all at once, he had to work toward something or work down. The lamps cast shadows against the men and the wood floor. Hugh listened to the regular, rhythmical rip of the husk. This was the pleasure in working with Norman, Hugh thought. That casual ebb and flow of speech and silence. He hoped Norman would harvest wood with them in early winter. Norman located the best groves and Hugh the best trees within them.

Headed to town, Norman said. For a rally. You want to come?

What poor timing for a rally, Hugh thought. If the politicians were farmers, they’d never have planned it during harvest time. No, he said. I’ll go in to vote in a few days.

Norman had expected as much, though he’d hoped otherwise. The rally would only last a few hours. This is what the opposition hoped for—that the tenants would be working so hard that they wouldn’t have time to fight for or even discuss their rights.

Maybe if he were ten years younger, he would join him, Hugh thought. Norman was thirty-eight. He himself was forty-seven and had lost his youthful energy. No, Hugh reconsidered, he wouldn’t have joined Norman even ten years ago. He cared too much about his farm to leave at this time of the year. Hugh’s thoughts turned to the tasks in his day, as was his habit in the evenings, especially during harvest season. He
would stack them, one by one, in the back of his mind, and wake up the next morning with a clear head, ready to tackle the same work or different work, or the same with variation. Hugh thought of Charles’s crossed arms, how he stood so far away from them Hugh hadn’t heard what he yelled at his son. Hugh knew better than to mention to Norman that Charles had found John with them.

Charles came by today, Hugh said. Wanted to make sure we’d cut your wheat. As though we’d let it go to seed.

Hugh assumed this statement would bring him back into a kind of solidarity with his friend. What a foolish agent, Norman would think, who thought he had to oversee the tenants for them to complete their work.

Norman scowled. I wish you’d let it go.

Hugh looked over.

Why should he profit from it? Norman asked. But I won’t stop you. I wouldn’t want you on bad terms with him. The last statement he said almost sarcastically.

Nor do I, Hugh said seriously.

The problem with the tenants, Norman thought, was that they lived in fear. Not all, he corrected himself. Not Hugh. Hugh was not a coward. David Owen acted out fear, but Hugh acted out of loyalty, a motivation, in regard to their agent or proprietor, even more difficult for Norman to understand. What in god’s name deemed Charles Blythe or Cecil Jacobs worthy of Hugh’s devout loyalty? One contract? It was expired, unfulfilled, and thus defunct. Norman yanked off a thick husk, and grunted.

I know men selling land up north, he said, tossing the ear into the bin.

You going to buy from them? Hugh asked.

No. I want you to buy from them.

Surprised, Hugh looked over. I have land.
You don’t own it. Won’t ever.

For the first time in his life, Hugh honestly considered this a possibility. I can’t farm in a new place, he said slowly. I’m not a young man.

You have Matthew.

Even if he never owned the land, Hugh wondered, would he want to leave? This was his home. Ever since he’d emigrated to the Island, there had never been a reason to travel farther than the nearest town. Moving north would be like moving to another country.

Da and I built the house, Hugh said. Clara lived here. This land has history. Your place does, too.

Norman’s grandfather had built a cabin on the land before the government divided up the Island’s land into lots and gave them away. His grandfather had taught his father Locke’s belief that the man who worked and profited from land became an owner of that land, and his father had taught this to Norman, who had been born on the Island the year Hugh’s family emigrated. The British acted as though it were the Scottish who were imposing, but the McLean family knew the Scottish had settled on the Island first, that they were the ones tolerating British emigration. Even as Norman was proud of what they’d done with the land, he no longer wanted to work on it if he didn’t own it. He would join the mail crew year round until Escheat won some victories, and he could claim all his profits as his own.

My place has more history than yours, Norman said. You have never owned land and then lost it.

Hugh paused. Neither have you, Hugh thought, but he knew what Norman meant. Theirs was a continuous narrative; there was no distinct line between when their ancestors’ lives stopped and theirs began. Hugh had grown up hearing over and over
again that one day the Cuthberts would own this land, and Norman had grown up hearing over and over again that the McLeans had once owned their land. Hugh remembered his father telling him how Charles’s father, unlike many agents, was fair. He had never cheated him out of their share of the profits. Norman thought the contract void, but Hugh couldn’t act according to a piece of paper. Charles was the boss, yes, but he was also a neighbor, and he was trustworthy. The Cuthberts would own this land, Hugh thought. If not him, then Matthew. Hugh was not a man to stop working toward something just because he couldn’t have it in his lifetime. He again shucked, slower now, like a wheel evenly rolling to a stop. These things took time.

Norman spoke to Hugh of the upcoming elections. He described who was running for what office and which politicians were sympathetic to Escheat and which ones were not only sympathetic, but would actually work to pass laws favorable for them. Hugh didn’t try to keep the names straight. He couldn’t tell if he were suddenly weary from the day or if Norman’s talk was making him weary. Norman said these men could enact land reform, and Hugh believed him. But right now he had a harvest to worry over. The lamp felt heavy, carrying it inside from the barn. Outside its light, the night was completely dark. Under Norman’s voice, Hugh heard the swish of the sea.

Inside the house, Norman placed his hand over the newspaper, folded on the counter. I suppose you don’t want to hear what’s in the paper? he asked.

I’ll listen to it, Hugh said.

I’ve just told you most of what it says.

Well, then.

I’d like to read it, Matthew said.
Norman looked over at the young man, who was removing a pie platter from the hearth. His debilitating shyness unfitted him for anything but solitary occupations; he would be a vote but never a voice for the movement. Yet Norman respected his intelligence. I’ll leave it here then, he said, lifting his hand and seating himself at the table.

The meal was a silent one. Da and Matthew ate steadily, and Norman alternated between brooding and tense scooping. Marilla wondered where he was headed, but figured he’d have said something if it concerned her. Or where he had been, but that did not concern her, either. The salmon and baked squash tasted good. It had been the first harvest day she’d made all the meals alone. A peaceful day, she thought, but tiring and sad, too. Although harvest was a time of gathering, she’d spent most of her time alone. Normally, the women shared household anecdotes, and she enjoyed talking to Mrs. Thorburn’s daughter, Ella. She wondered whether Da wanted her to stay away from the Thorburns tomorrow. Her father didn’t seem as skittish as other tenants about getting in trouble. Lord knows she had enough work to do here, but it would be pleasant to socialize with other women. After the meal, she assumed Norman would pace, but he continued to sit while she cleared the table and cleaned up and this unnerved her. It was as though Norman didn’t want or need to deliberate, as though he’d already come to a decision, and this decision was unsatisfactory and inevitable. He leaned back and tugged at his beard, then leaned forward and rested his forehead in his hands. During any other harvest season, Norman would have taken out the fiddle. Da would play, haltingly, the couple songs he knew and then Norman would take requests from them and the neighbors and play every song requested, making up words or even whole verses when his memory lapsed on the lyrics. Marilla associated the sound of the fiddle with the smell of whiskey, since these gatherings were the only times Da brought
out hard alcohol. Tonight, after Da left the barn, he brought out whiskey, and he, Norman, and Matthew drank, still silent, at the table.

Hugh had nothing to say to Norman, but he didn’t want to leave him alone. By remaining at their house, Norman was soliciting companionship. Hugh had left him alone at other times—such as when Norman’s wife died, because Hugh thought this gesture the most helpful and appropriate. Hugh had felt himself pull back from his friend then, for many months, until his own wife died, and Norman began to come over to cheer the children, and their friendship revived. And during that time, after Clara’s death, Hugh thought it might have been wrong to abandon his friend, and that he hadn’t left him alone for Norman’s sake, but for his own, because he was afraid to deal with grief, even second hand, and all its irrationality. These last few months, ever since Norman instigated violence in his quest for land reform, Hugh had felt Norman pulling away from him. They had the same discussions and came to the same tenuous agreements or disagreements; their friendship was stuck in a rut. After each discussion, Norman seemed more distant, and Hugh didn’t blame his friend but still wished it otherwise. Right now, though they drank the same whiskey, Norman was plotting something, Hugh thought, that he himself could never imagine. Hugh lifted a silent toast to his friend’s success and to them both coming to no harm and hoped without much hope that next year their harvest celebrations would occur. Norman didn’t notice Hugh raise his glass.

To Marilla, the scent of whiskey seemed disquieting without music alongside it, and she slipped away to get Charles’s horse. She didn’t ride him; the thought didn’t cross her mind. Such an act would be like walking, unannounced, into the Blythe’s house. By the light of a lantern, she brushed the horse and bridled him, then blew out the candle and hung the lantern by the outer barn door and led the horse outside. The
wind swished in the trees. She smelled the cut wheat before her eyes made out the sheaves. The dark shapes looked like people huddling in the field or like strangely shaped rocks. She walked by their potato fields and by the Thorburn’s uncut wheat. Close to the Blythe’s land, the darkness receded a bit; the nearby sea provided some light. The ocean was a constant noise she’d never consciously noticed, except the one time she’d been in town, inland, and she’d been startled by its absence. The Blythes had a groom, she remembered, she had met him; he lived in a cottage closer to the barn than the stone house. She would give him the horse.

As she neared the Blythe’s land, she saw a lantern bobbing toward her, coming up from the shore. She stopped to let it pass, hoping its carrier wasn’t looking beyond its ring of light. Then she heard Elisabeth’s laugh. Who was with her? Marilla thought. John? Mrs. Blythe? Marilla’s lack of female companionship that day, coupled with her desire to see Elisabeth, who she hadn’t talked with in years, prompted her to step forward and say her teacher’s name.

The lantern stopped. Who is it? Elisabeth asked.

Marilla, Marilla said and walked into the light. Your father left his horse at our place. I’ve brought him back.

My dear, Elisabeth said. She ran to her, and hugged her. Marilla turned her head away and her arms remained at her sides. None of her people were openly affectionate—in fact, they looked down on it as excessive and uncouth. Marilla tried not to feel disdainful. It was Elisabeth, after all. She was a gentlewomen, and thus not bound to their rules and, Marilla intuited, without knowing any other gentlewomen, perhaps also an exception to her own class. What a silly man, her teacher said, stepping back, and took the reins which Marilla had perfunctorily offered her.
Elisabeth turned and introduced Marilla to the young man behind her, her fiance, James Williams. Marilla thought about what John had said, that James was an influential lawyer working on the tenants’ side for land reform. Marilla saw no traits that distinguished him from any other gentleman, except that he adored Elisabeth, keeping his eyes on her during the introduction.

We’re having an engagement party in two weeks, Elisabeth said. I’d like you to come.

Marilla was astounded at Elisabeth’s naiveté. At least John knew to keep their association a secret.

You could wear one of my dresses, Elisabeth added. No one would ever know.

But they would. Clothes weren’t the main difference, Marilla had noted years ago, when John first borrowed Matthew’s clothes to work in. Nor accents. It was when they spoke and how much they spoke and the shape of their bodies and how they moved them. The Cuthberts walked on or along the ground while the Blythes seemed to walk across it, indifferent to it. Marilla had no desire to go to the party, anyway. She wouldn’t know anyone and wasn’t curious about them, either.

Thank you, she said. But we’ll be in the midst of the potato harvest.

You don’t work all evening.

We rise early. At their own harvest parties, Marilla had stayed up until dawn and worked without rest the whole next day. But Elisabeth wouldn’t know that.

I’m sorry to hear that, Elisabeth said. Well, at least let me fetch John for you. Elisabeth handed the reigns to James, instructed him to put the horse up, and walked out of the ring of light before Marilla could protest. James nodded at her and walked away, leaving her eyes to adjust to darkness.
Marilla was not surprised Elisabeth knew about them; John and his sister seemed friendly with one another and neither could keep a secret for long. She thought about leaving, but John, once he knew she had been there, would follow her so it seemed best to wait. The crickets had begun chirping, and she listened to them, contentedly. She and John had only been on one evening walk since his arrival, and she missed their time alone together. The suppers he’d eaten with them hadn’t been the same without Norman’s presence. In previous years, Norman would go on and on, distracting Matthew and Da, and she and John would exchange glances, laughing together at Norman’s erratic gestures and unwarranted intensity. These glances, an effect of the history and knowledge and views they shared, caused Marilla to think that she might love John, if she knew what love meant. She’d had no mother to watch or tell her, and asking a neighbor about such an intimate matter was simply not done. But there’d been little to laugh at this year, and even when Marilla and John had felt an impulse to exchange glances, they’d suppressed their desire, hampered by Da’s eyes, moving back and forth between them, trying to figure them out. He suspected, Marilla knew. She did not mind but would not confide unless asked.

John walked toward her, his strides too long for his height, his usual gait. He didn’t carry a lantern. This pleased her. She’d taught him that, especially on clear nights, one could see best without one. They exchanged greetings, he offered her his arm, and she took it. They headed down the road that sloped down to a path to the sea. She felt formal, walking arm in arm, but also comfortable in this formality. By his arm’s pressure and his silence, she knew he had something to say. They were often quiet when alone together, speaking only a few phrases every few minutes, but complete silence on his part denoted his subsequent talkativeness so she waited, noting the
stillness of the night, its sudden coolness. She was pleased the path’s width allowed them to continue walking side by side.

John was unsure how to broach the topic. A plea to leave with him seemed unrefined in general and inadvisable toward Marilla. She was content here. He felt this contentedness as she walked lightly alongside him. Her arm was as strong or stronger than his own but lacked his tautness and tenseness. He wished and hoped that her satisfaction resulted from being with him, yet he also knew and admired that it came from being in this place and from being herself. When they reached the flat, red rocks, she withdrew her arm to balance herself, and he took her hand and led her down the least steep route toward the sand. She lifted her skirt and looked down and he liked the angle of her head like this. Not a hair out of place in her part or the braids wound into a bun on the back of her head, eyes cast down, jaw concentrated but relaxed, chin tucked toward her chest. When he’d fled to the ice boats that winter, John had recognized in himself and in other men that they left places for reasons. Some private, some public, some political, some imagined. But always for a reason, and he doubted if he himself were reason enough for Marilla to leave.

They walked down the beach to the edge of the water, and then alongside it, skirting the edge of the waves. To John, the sea seemed not to be going in or out; the waves lapped close but not too close to their feet. His eyes followed the sea out to the horizon. Silver, deep blue, and black waves. There was no white foam on the caps. Since his work on the ice boats, any calm sea seemed deceptive. Still, it was the brightest, clearest night he’d seen since some of the winter nights along the shore, drinking in cramped French hovels with the iceboat crew. He squeezed Marilla’s hand. Let’s play a game, he said.

What game? she asked.
I talked to my father today, he said. You guess what we talked about.

That’s fine, she said. I’ll guess.

Wait, he said. Every time you guess wrong, I get to kiss you.

Marilla half-smiled. All right, she said.

And if you guess right, you get to kiss me.

Marilla laughed. So you win either way.

If you want to view it like that.

They were walking toward the bluffs which rose to Norman’s land. John stopped and faced Marilla and held both her hands. She looked down.

All right, she said. You told your father about us.

No, he said. He was upset he hadn’t, but pleased she credited him with more bravery than he had. He kissed her lightly between her nose and eye and on her mouth.

That was twice, she said. She pulled her hands away. I get a free guess. You asked your father when we’d be able to buy our land.

No, he said.

He would never ask his father this, it wasn’t his business. But suddenly he knew one thing Marilla wanted and how he might convince her to come with him.

You asked if you could buy that land up north you’ve been talking about, she guessed. From his eyes she knew it was a yes, so she kissed him on the mouth and then trotted sideways down the beach, laughing and holding her skirts to the side.

And he said yes! John yelled after her.

Coming to the bottom of a terrace of rocks, she settled herself into a crevice on top of sand and leaned her back on the rock face behind. John settled down close to her and put his arm around her waist. She laid a head on his shoulder and felt strange that she was sitting still but doing nothing with her hands. She lifted her head and ran her
fingers through John’s hair. It would be lovely if they could sit together every night on these rocks, above this sea, and she could do this. Maybe this meant she loved him, she thought, her desire to every day run her fingers through his hair.

Marilla, he said. His voice projected outward, toward the sea and stars. He turned and kissed her hair. His eyes told her she was beautiful. She felt him smile against the side of her head.

Marilla was pleased her beauty made John happy. To her appearance was something she’d thought about only a handful of times in her life. At Ma’s funeral, a neighbor woman had said to another, What a homely thing, she certainly doesn’t take after her mother, and she had turned away in shame. She remembered later, after she became a woman, examining her face as she cleaned a window and thinking she was not homely anymore, but not pretty, either. She remembered the look John had given her in the garden on his first day back this summer, a look she had not returned, because, unlike their glances that shared a common observation, it was a glance like this one, that said, you are beautiful and, although not embarrassed, she had no response to that. Perhaps John meant beautiful in the way she thought Da and Matthew beautiful, and their small house and the horses, and anything she loved. So perhaps this look meant he loved her.

There are many tracts of land for sale up north, John said. I could help your father buy one, too. John explained his plan further: He and Da could farm as neighbors. Da would own his own land, and he and she could be neighbors. After his father’s two-year probationary period, John would be free of him. He could then marry Marilla. He continued on and on, as Marilla knew he’d been wanting to—about his connections up north, about the fertile but neglected land, about how that plot, too, bordered the sea. His body vibrated against hers while he talked.
John’s vision was pleasant to her, if impractical. John knew less about keeping house than about farming. She supposed he could eat his meals with the Cuthberts until they married. But then who would keep house for Da and Matthew? Well, she supposed they could all live together. But Da would reject the proposal. He wanted this land and no other. Then she thought of Da’s quiet discontentedness ever since Mr. Blythe had come to collect rent, or maybe it stemmed more from Norman’s absence. Da did not like to be alone, and he wasn’t the kind of man who made friends easily.

Could you help Norman buy land, too? Marilla asked.

He has a reputation, John said. But mainly around these parts. We don’t talk about him in Charlottetown and up there is twice that far. I don’t see why not. I’ll try. Da might not leave otherwise, Marilla said. He still might not.

John licked his lips, tasting sea salt. So, he’d have to deal with Norman McLean, too. Granted, he liked the man, almost idolized him. But he wondered if it might be easier to start out farming without someone so incredibly competent around to point out his mistakes. Hugh would let him figure it all out alone, but Norman would give constant advice. Persuading Marilla to marry him meant convincing Hugh to move near them, which meant assisting Norman to move there, too. Were all people connected to one another in such uncompromising and intricate ways?

The tide was coming in, rising closer to their feet every minute. It was, indeed, John thought, irritated. His earlier not noticing didn’t make it nonexistent.

Let’s take that path, Marilla said, standing up, and helping him to rise. As always, her strength startled him. The path led across a few rocks to a grassy slope that rose onto the boundary path between Norman’s land and the Owen’s.
John nodded. They couldn’t walk side by side so she stuck out a hand behind her, and he took it. Norman was at my house when I left, Marilla said. Let’s see if he’s still there. Let’s propose the plan to them now.

John assented and clasped her hand tighter. He hadn’t expected her to be impulsive, but why not ask now? As long as she was next to him, he could speak. They both felt as though they were running down a steep hill, accelerating and, to lock their knees, to try to stop, before they reached the bottom might prove painful or fatal. Marilla knew John wouldn’t speak if she weren’t there, which pleased her. Also, at least in that moment, her father and Norman’s friendship gave her hope. She thrilled at these potential changes, ones that would come from her and John’s actions, not from those in authority or the weather.

Hugh asked Norman to stay overnight but Norman refused. Wouldn’t want to put the children in danger, he said. Hugh couldn’t tell if his friend was mocking him or serious. Norman himself didn’t know. The statement had come to mind, and he had said it. Norman was slightly drunk and, when Matthew brought his horse to him, he thought Matthew had noticed his inebriation and wanted to save him the trouble, and thanked him. He mounted without difficulty, out of long habit. Matthew, like Marilla, had wanted to avoid him seeing Charles’s horse. But when Matthew had gone to the barn the horse hadn’t been there, so he’d known Marilla had taken it back. He told his father this and, because they didn’t know when she’d left, for a while neither man wondered why she hadn’t returned.

Norman trotted his horse down the road, away from the Cuthbert’s and the Blythe’s, toward the river at the edge of his land that divided the lot from the next. He would need to cross the river on his way to town. The night was very dark and very
still. No leaves or grass rustled; Norman heard nothing but crickets, an occasional cow or gull, and the sea. Stars shone above and, though this night he did not look at them, he was aware of the constellations as a familiar backdrop. He pulled up his horse to examine the path between his wheat field and David Owen’s flaxseed field. This was one border of his land. The others were the cliffs overlooking the sea, the river, and the road on which his horse stood. The path, Norman estimated, was the width of three men standing shoulder to shoulder. Sufficient, he thought. Especially on a windless night and with a bare flaxseed field. The flames would not reach Owen’s crops. He dismounted and led his horse toward his house. He planned to burn his land.

He tied the horse outside the house. Inside, the constant scent of food and fire had faded; the scent of wood and, strangely, his wife’s perfume remained. He opened her closet and looked at her single-layered white muslin wedding dress, the one article of her clothing he hadn’t given away. No woman wants another’s wedding dress. He had been ignorant enough to ask, but only once. He stuck his neck toward the dress, sniffed at its scent, pulled his head back, and shut the door. He then gathered his knives, a pair of trousers he’d left, and few letters, and packed them in his saddle bags. He considered burning the fields but not the house. After all, his grandpa and father had built the place; it was one of the oldest Scottish houses on the Island. But he shook his head as he pulled the saddlebag straps tight; he was not one for half measures.

If his mother and father were still alive, he would not do this. If Helen had lived, he might not either. Despite her adventurous nature, she liked the hearth as much as any woman. Even if Hugh weren’t loyal to Charles, Norman realized, his friend would have his children’s lives to consider. Perhaps it was better, then, that his own family was dead. He saw his wife, standing up on the boat’s bow, peering into the fog, her usual poised, inquisitive stance. The boat had hit a chunk of ice, and the jolt knocked
her into an icy, swift-flowing river. They’d never found her body. He thought of Elisabeth, when he’d seen her two summers ago, standing in a similar stance at the edge of his cliff. She hadn’t turned as he walked toward her. Do you ever consider jumping off? she’d asked. He’d suspected she was hysterical and grabbed her from behind, by her arms, and dragged her away from the edge. She’d turned and kissed him on the mouth. This action confirmed his suspicions, and it took him a week to realize otherwise and return her affection. Even then, Elisabeth seemed as indifferent as a prostitute in her attitude toward him. During the second autumn of their relationship, one morning he woke before her and examined on his nightstand her heavy, intricately patterned and layered dress, so different from his wife’s plain, thin clothes or the colorful, cheap dresses of the prostitutes in New Brunswick, and remembered Elisabeth was a gentlewoman. For a moment her indifferent attitude fascinated him. This moment passed and he didn’t think about it again. It did bother him when he confused Elisabeth’s mannerisms with Helen’s. He thought Helen deserved to remain distinct and above all other women.

He re-opened his saddlebags and took out a letter from Elisabeth. Dear Norman, she had written. I am writing to tell you of my engagement. You will be happy to hear my fiance is a lawyer and working for Escheat. He desires to take land away from landlords who haven’t paid their quit-rent. The land would then belong to the Island government, and farmers could buy it from them. Or maybe you despise all government involvement. Maybe you are too radical to appreciate men like him.

Needless to say, I won’t be seeking you out this autumn. If you think you can use this letter to blackmail my father or me, you don’t know me well. I don’t care who knows about us. I remained reticent because privacy is intimate, but we are done with all that. Then again, maybe
you won’t consider blackmail. You are the most unpredictable person I know. That is what I like most about you. That and your surprising gentleness.

Again, Norman cinched his saddlebags shut. Still holding the letter, he led his horse through the dense white pine grove, to an old oak, which hung over the river, and tied him there. Norman had sobered up; he felt steady on his feet and clear in his head. He walked through his potato field, which someone had humped over—Hugh, probably—and through the wheat and oat fields before circling around and back to the house. Inside, he knelt next to the hearth and started a fire, using the letter as piece of kindling. He started another fire in the wheat field, not clearing the ground or placing a barrier of stones or a ditch around it as was customary for fires outdoors. He started a third one in the oat field and then with firm, quick steps, walked back to the house. He built small uncontained fires on the floor from wood kindling, and then ripped up his wife’s wedding dress and used strips of the fabric to make trails between his small fires and the hearth fire. Immediately, the muslin caught on fire and connected them. He took two tablecloths that he hadn’t used in god knew how many years, climbed onto the roof, and stuffed them down the chimney. He paused and looked out. The fire hadn’t yet spread in the fields. He wiped sweat off his forehead and shivered. It was a cool night, the first real night of autumn, the first night he could imagine the coming winter. He climbed off the roof and headed toward the river.

Norman stood on the outskirts of the white pine grove until he saw flames ascending, snatching the grain stalks. The fire’s bright colors startled Norman’s eyes but he didn’t turn away. He had always been fascinated with fire. Building one was something, like speaking, that he didn’t remember not knowing how to do. Back at the oak, the horse stomped and shook its head. When the horse whinnied, Norman untied him, mounted, and descended into the river. It was low, and even the deepest point
didn’t lap past the horse’s belly. As they reached the center, Norman scooped up water and tossed it over his face. Drops hung off the end of his blonde beard. The resentment in him abated slowly, like waves going out with the tide. He scooped up more water and sipped it from his hand. He expanded his cheeks and swished the water around in his mouth and gurgled it in his throat like a playful child. When the horse climbed out on the opposite bank, Norman patted him on the neck. The horse tried to turn back toward the lot but Norman guided him in the opposite direction, along the bluff. The moon shimmered along the dark of the night sea. Norman looked sideways at the water. His eyes traced the sea to the horizon and the horizon up to the stars. He felt an intense yet tenuous satisfaction he’d never experienced. On the ten miles into town he didn’t once look back.

By the light of the fire Matthew read the paper. His father, a few feet from him, wove a basket. They sat in two straight-backed chairs; the rocking chair, once his mother’s, sat empty. The men had not spoken since Norman left. Matthew read about the harvest in other lots and counties, the most recent shipwrecks, the winter weather predictions. Having known for months how he’d vote, he skipped the political commentary. He read the articles on elections in the two other counties, however, and tapped his feet on the floor. His father added three frayed, unusable basket strands to the fire.

Marilla entered the anteroom, and he heard someone else’s step—John’s, it must be. Matthew folded the paper over, set it on the chair, and stepped into the anteroom. John smiled as he untied his boot. Marilla, her eyes happy, looked at John and then at Matthew.

Norman here? she asked.

Matthew shook his head.
John’s smiled faltered but remained. He tilted his head outside and Matthew and Marilla follow him into the night. Matthew stood, arms crossed, in front of the door. Marilla and John faced him.

My father has given me permission to buy land up north, he said.

Matthew nodded, not surprised. John had talked to him about this.

I wanted to know—

Good god, Matthew said. Behind Marilla and John the sky had lit up. Clouds of smoke cluttered the clear, blue-black night. He ran inside. Da, he said. Fire.

Hugh dropped the basket and stood. Where?

The far side of the lot, I think.

Hugh retrieved the basket and set it on the wooden chair. Shovels, he said. Maddocks. He didn’t bother to take a jacket. Matthew followed him outside, where John and Marilla stood, facing the light of the fire, holding hands. So, it’s true, Hugh thought. In the barn, he handed Matthew and John shovels and took a maddock for himself. Instead of going by the main road, the four of them ran as the crow flies on paths through neighboring farms. Fire! Hugh yelled. Matthew whooped, an inhumane, guttural cry. It was the loudest and strangest noise Hugh had ever heard from his son.

Norman’s house was on fire. They stood side by side on the main road. All four sides of the structure were burning. The roof had caved in. A magnificent, horrific block of brightness. They were too late to save it. Hugh, reduced to a spectator, shivered at the fire’s crackle. It was the only sound in the night.

Behind the house the wheat field was burning. Matthew noticed before his father. Without a word, he was running to the path bordering the McLean and Owen lands. His shovel cut open the ground. Recent rain had dampened the top layer. Hugh joined his son in digging a trench. Soon other men and women joined.
Digging was difficult. The land hadn’t known a blanket of snow or sustained rain for many months. The tenants dug, a meter or two in between each one, not speaking. In front of Hugh stood David Owen and behind him Thorburn’s wife. Hugh began to feel the fire, the kind of heat he had felt near the hearth, but never, as now, over his head. He might have been scared if he weren’t so close to water. The sea below him, the river on the other side of the grove of trees. His friend, Norman, Hugh thought. A mixture of calculation and madness. An intense anger rose in him, trumping any remaining admiration. But he was in the hole to his ankles. His convictions formed themselves in repose. He wondered whether he should dig deeper or connect his hole to the ones in front of and behind him. He decided to connect.

Marilla was laying wet bags in a line in front of the trench. Not here, Da said. The trees. She understand, regathered the bags, and ran toward the other side of the land. The house no longer a structure but a pile of burning logs, the largest bonfire she’d ever seen. Around it, small contained fires burned, the stumps and their surrounding potato stalks. Marilla wondered whether the potatoes themselves would be sheltered underground, whether Norman would be able to salvage that crop. Unlike her father, she didn’t yet suspect that Norman himself had started the fires.

John begged the horse off of his father, who sat on it on the main road. The horse pulled his head and body away from the fire, and his father reined him back.

We need more bags, John said. I’ll get them from home.

At first, Charles, still half asleep, sneered at the destruction. Let Norman’s old land burn, he thought. He imagined Norman’s face when he saw his former home turned to charcoal—a set mouth and dull eyes, a sad awareness that he couldn’t control everything. As Charles sat up straight and shook his head and shoulders to expel his
tiredness, he suddenly understand the fires could be Norman’s doing, and to let it burn might mean to let Norman win. He dismounted.

Ask Eleanor for help, he said as he handed the boy the reins.

Eleanor, Elisabeth, and his mother all helped John soak bags and, when they ran out of them, linens. Elisabeth and John loaded them in the horses’ saddlebags and across the horses’ necks and rode back side by side. If either would have turned their heads as the horses galloped by the trench, they would have seen their father digging with the Cuthbert’s shovel, the one John had dropped before he mounted the horse. They found Marilla in a clearing, around her stumps of trees cut down last winter for firewood. Her face very red, her hands on her hips, a few wet bags spread in a row near her feet, she faced the oncoming fire. She turned her head in their direction and, when they halted, approached them.

The reins, she said.

Marilla held both horses’ reins while Elisabeth and John spread the bags and linens, expanding her row of bags across the entire tree line. Each time a horse pulled away, Marilla yanked its head back. When John and Elisabeth returned, their faces and arms sweating and red from exertion and the flames, she gave the horses back. All three retreated to the far side of the clearing as the flames advanced forward. By the time the fire reached their line of defense, it had died down. The lack of fuel in the clearing might have caused it to die out naturally. Smoke rose in billows from charred saplings. Small fires jumped around in the branches of larger trees. As the three walked beyond the edge of the burn toward Norman’s house, Marilla smacked at these spot fires with a wet sheet.
It’s ruined, she said of the sheet, after a dozen or so smacks, as though she needed to acknowledge the ruin of something small and concrete before she could acknowledge the larger incalculable ruin.

How. . . . Elisabeth said. She looked at the smoldering logs, which had once been Norman’s house. There was still no wind, and the smoke rose directly from the land to sky.

It must have been set, John said. Someone must have started it. But who? he thought. Every tenant needed the harvest, and all of them idealized and feared Norman.

The fire now out, the tenants and the Blythes wandered over the smoking land. The ground, still hot, singed their boots and burned through indoor, cloth shoes. Most men wore their long underwear tops, and a couple of the women wore nightdresses, looking like disoriented ghosts. Both wheat and oat fields had burned, but the flames hadn’t jumped the trench. Shovels and mattocks lay idle inside. Individuals passed one another with nods or said something unintelligible.

Over each section of the land, Charles held up his lantern to survey the damage. He noted the singed pile of logs, the remains of the house his father had told him was one of the oldest on the Island. He leaned down in the field behind Norman’s house, feeling the burnt grains, allowing the soot to darken his hands. He kicked at the burnt potato stalks, which he had humped just that morning, their thickness resisting his first kick and on the second kick breaking through. Underneath he found unharmed potatoes. Their cool firmness seemed a balm to his hands, which ached from clutching the shovel. Charles tore off a potato and, holding it in one hand and the lantern in the other, stepped onto the adjacent stump.

Join up, now, he yelled. Come on over.
Their arms lifted up to shield their eyes from the lantern light, the tenants approached. He had never spoken to them as a group, but only a couple weeks earlier he had collected their rent, and memories of his commanding presence spurred their movement. There were fewer than fifty of them—many of the women and children had stayed away, and it seemed a small group to Charles when they bunched together.

How the hell—Charles began but stopped. Who isn’t here? he said.

The tenants looked to their left and right. Many of them weren’t there. They didn’t know what he was asking.

Norman isn’t here, Charles said. And you all know damn well why he isn’t here. He started this fire.

The crowd murmured. Hugh clutched his hair with one hand.

Is it true? Marilla asked. She stood next to her father, dirt and soot streaked on her cheeks. John and Matthew stood on the other side of her. Hugh didn’t reply.

The tenants breathed heavily, and in their silence, Charles heard their listening. We have a system set up here, Charles said. It’s working. You earn money, you’re living well. If you have a good harvest, you reuse the seeds from that year. Yet Norman has insisted on changing this process. His change is harmful. Look around you!

The tenants had already examined the land. Now, their gaze remained fixed on their agent, who talked with his hands as much as mouth. The lantern bobbed as he spoke, illuminating a couple of their faces with each arm movement.

As you know, I was patient with Norman, Charles said. I could have evicted him months ago. Even now, I could sue him into compliance but do not. And this is how he repays me. And repays you, his neighbors. Your wheat crop, too, could have been destroyed.
We don’t agree with him, Mr. Blythe. It was Mrs. Thorburn who spoke. We never sided with him.

We pay our rent, Mr. Blythe, David Owen added. All of us.

People murmured in agreement.

Do you remember the parable of the talents? Charles asked. Before the master leaves on a journey, he gives one servant five talents, another servant two talents, and a third servant one talent. The servants given five and two talents invest the money and double their talents. When the master returns, he promotes those servants to rulers. The servant given one talent hides that talent in the ground, earning nothing while the master is away. The master casts this servant out of his presence. Norman is like that third servant, only he has not buried his talent in the ground but, even worse, thrown it in the sea. By burning his own house, he has not even held on to what was entrusted to him!

None of us agree with his craziness, Mr. Blythe, Thorburn said.

You are faithful tenants, Charles said. And you’ll be rewarded, I promise.

Hugh pulled on his beard. Someone had to defend his friend’s honor.

If Norman started this fire, Hugh said. Which we have no evidence of.

Who the hell. . . . Thorburn said.

If he did, he should not have, Hugh said. But that doesn’t mean he’s all wrong.

What could be right about this, Charles said. He raised his lantern to the damage. Although startled Hugh had spoken, Charles didn’t doubt his ability to counter him. He moved the lantern toward his tenant’s face.

I would never harm any part of this lot, Hugh said. You know that, sir. But I’d like to own my own land as much as the next man.
Goddamn Hugh, I don’t need to explain details to you. Owning your own land wouldn’t be a reward. You’d be earning much less if you sold your own grain. Only because I sell it in large quantities does it bring back the prof—

More profits isn’t the reward I want, sir. You are a land-owning man. Would you give up that privilege, even if it allowed you to double your profits?

No, he probably wouldn’t, Charles thought. But most tenants didn’t think like that.

This isn’t a question of Escheat, John blurted out. He pushed through the crowd and stepped onto the stump next to his father. For a moment, his mind didn’t register all the people; he talked as he would to Matthew in the barn or Marilla in the kitchen. We should let our representatives and the courts and our votes decide such things, John said. The question is: Do you side with a man who would set fire to his own land, burn his own livelihood, to force a few dollar’s loss on my father, who in every encounter with Norman has simply been doing his job?

John sucked in his breath. His father, startled, turned and looked at him. The lantern moved so John could see the Cuthberts’ faces. Each of their mouths were slightly open.

Certainly not, Thorburn said. We want to live in peace. To hell with gestures like this.

John stepped off the log and ran his forearm across his forehead. Soot smeared.

I won’t listen to them slander Norman, Hugh said to no one in particular, as John approached the Cuthberts.

I ain’t sticking around myself, John said.

John, you— Elisabeth said.

Let’s go, John said. I have something to discuss with you, Mr. Cuthbert.
Now, John? Marilla said. I would think—

Shhh, John said. He faced her and touched her sooty lips with a couple of his dirty fingers and gently squeezed her shoulder. If his father saw him touch her, fine. How does all this change *our* story? he asked her.

I don’t know if I’m up for much else tonight, Hugh said. But I’m sure I can’t sleep, either. You’re welcome in our home.

Hugh was grateful the boy had veered the talk from Hugh himself. Arguing with his agent in front of other tenants, Hugh thought. What was he doing? He might get himself evicted, too. He pulled his hair and shook his head. In a couple hours he’d come back and in the light examine the fire’s damage.

John took Marilla’s hand and turned her away from the crowd. If his father held the lantern up at the perfect angle, he would see them together. Right now, that was a risk he wanted.

Hugh and Matthew followed John and Marilla onto the main road. Behind them, Elisabeth walked, leading the two horses. The rest of the crowd listened to Charles. Because he was their agent, because they—some more than others—agreed with him, because he spoke with conviction. As he talked, the stars faded. The sky turned from black to dark blue to the deep blue of a calm early morning. Gulls squawked. Light pierced through the remaining smoke and shone off Owen’s uncut wheat.
Part Three
Elisabeth sat on one side the church pew, her father sat on the other. In between them sat James, John, and three male cousins who claimed residency in the district and thus could vote there. Elisabeth wore a yellow dress and a cream-colored shawl. Her hair was gathered at the nape of her neck and a straw hat decorated with a cream ribbon sat on her head. She was the only woman in the room and conscious of it. Her beauty pleased her. Her straight shoulders and triumphant expression, however, came from the fact that she had, for the first time, cast a vote. James reached over and squeezed her gloved hand. He, too, was proud of her. Until they were married, he had no right to grant what she requested or to argue with her father, but he hadn’t agreed with him, either. For that she was grateful.

A stocky man at the podium droned on. The vote had been cast yet he still had something to say. Elisabeth wasn’t listening. The noise outside, at first shuffling and murmuring, became stomping and an Escheat song. It threatened to drown out the speaker. Elisabeth tried to understand the words. She picked out Norman’s deep voice, slightly off-tune and out of rhythm, but belted out, anyway. She smiled.

The morning after Norman had burned his plot, Elisabeth had cried. Not for the crops. Norman could do what he wished with his own land. The tenants had enough food to survive and her father’s monetary loss was minimal. The house in which she and Norman had made love was destroyed and, even as she chided herself for sentimentality, this pained her. She remembered the few mornings she’d spent there. Norman had made porridge, because he always made porridge, and she didn’t know how to make anything better. They’d eaten in discussion or laughter at items as small and predictable as a change in weather. His arm across the back of her chair, her eyes on the porridge or his eyes or the dark spots on his collar bone where she might have bruised him during the night. He was more gentle with her. In those moments she’d
wanted every morning to be such, a wish not possible on the lot, maybe not even on the Island. They would have had to go somewhere else, together and alone. That was hard to do. Her brother, she knew, planned to completely and forever abandon the Blythe’s life, and she wished him the best. Such a choice, however, seemed less fraught if you were a man. Leaving had never been a real option, anyway. Merging their lives had never crossed Norman’s mind, she was certain of that. Most of the time she too had been fine with the limits of their relationship. Life did not consist of nights and mornings. There were days to be composed, too. Thoughts of inevitable estrangement from the friendships, gatherings, and intelligence of her own society overpowered her daydreams. She had not even bothered to say goodbye in person.

The man stopped talking. He’d had to yell out his parting words, whatever they were. The crowd outside was so loud it seemed as though the church wall was nonexistent. When the Blythes stood and turned, James grasped Elisabeth’s arm, his brow furled. It was his first rural election.

It’s often like this, Elisabeth told him.

Sounds like a mob, he said.

They’re never violent, she said.

Picking up a corner of her dress, she slid out from the end of the pew. James wanted to exit ahead of her, but she insisted they walk side by side. Four abreast could walk through the open church doors.

The afternoon was chilly. The haze at the edge of the sky would soon settle over the town and the people, but for a short while Elisabeth could see distant particulars. In the crowd, she located the faces of a half-a-dozen of their tenants. Norman stood at the front of the pack, not ten meters from the front door. His beard pointed outward, he was marching in place, and singing.
I should have shot him when I had the chance, her father said to one of the cousins. James gripped Elisabeth’s arm while she strained to glimpse Norman. She wanted him to see her. For him to know that in this she had succeeded. Hurry up, her father said. He looked over his shoulder at her and James. The Blythes were promised at a friend’s house for tea before they headed back to the lot. John glanced back, too. He didn’t look at Norman. It had always been easier for him than her to pretend he had no association.

A man behind them told the crowd to shut up. The Escheat song dissolved into yelling. The Blythe party turned together, for a moment intrigued beyond rational action. Norman had raised his fists at the Brit, and behind Norman a man raised a shovel. The man waved it in the air, raised it higher, and rushed forward. Before he reached the Brit he brought the shovel down on Norman’s head. Shaking James off her, Elisabeth leapt forward. James grabbed her arm again. John took her other arm and the two young men turned her in the opposite direction. She struggled.

I’ll meet you outside the hotel, her father yelled. He had a pistol out.

John, Elisabeth said. Look—

The young men lifted her by her armpits so her feet didn’t touch the ground. She kicked at one of their ankles and then the other’s. It was hard for her to breathe.

Don’t be a fool, John said.

Don’t you want to see—

It’s dangerous.

A hundred meters away she was still kicking. Townspeople turned to watch. James and John lifted her up the hotel steps and sat her on a wicker porch chair. Heaving, she shrugged off her coat. She felt her messed up hair and messed it up more.
Her hat had fallen off somewhere. She found the cream-colored ribbon in the hood of her coat and distractedly smoothed it with her fingers.

What— James said.

Let her be, John said. That was Norman. The tenant father evicted. He’s one of our favorites.

The young men stood at the porch railing, looking out. They straightened their vests and three-quarter length coats. Townspeople either stopped and stared toward the brawl or walked over to it.

Elisabeth thought about when she’d first seen Norman, when she was teaching Marilla to read. Sometimes he’d walked into the Cuthbert house and, without acknowledging anyone, laid on his back in front of the hearth on the round, body-size braided rug. Immediately, he fell asleep, his bearded jaw moving comfortably. He wasn’t afraid to show his tiredness, Elisabeth thought, as he wasn’t afraid to show his anger. The rest of them, because of small or large fears, went around intentionally or unintentionally deceiving one other. Elisabeth pushed off the chair, took the porch steps two at a time, and ran back toward the crowd.

There was something satisfying in seeing Norman immobile, Charles thought. He had never seen the man still. Already two tenants kneeled next to Norman. By the time Hugh arrived and kneeled down, Charles could see Norman’s boots but not his face. The crowd had encircled the fallen man. Others surged up the incline toward the church, a voting hall turned place of refuge. Two of Charles’s tenants, who had brought their young sons along to experience the voting, yanked them through the still-open doors. One of them exchanged glances with Charles. Madness, he yelled.
Charles nodded and palmed his pistol. He had not, yet, seen any other firearms. He would not start that kind of mayhem. A few men threw a few punches, yelling and swearing. A few Brits jumped into the crowd. Charles was glad no one in his family was that crazy. Perhaps Elisabeth, but she’d been taken care of. He wondered about the Irishman. Had he been drunk? How drunk do you have to be to hurt your own man? The strike with the shovel had seemed strong, direct, intentional. Did Norman have enemies Charles didn’t know about? Or, more likely, had someone hired that man?

Charles pulled his suit jacket tight and glanced from side to side. His cousins stood on his right, on his left two men he knew by face but not by name. When he looked back at the crowd, Hugh and Thorburn were carrying Norman out. Thorburn held the upper body, Hugh, the legs, and faced the church and Charles. Hugh’s wide eyes and clenched jaw forced Charles to look away, toward the bystanders, mainly women. Some cheered their men on, others yelled for them to get out. Norman was dead. In that moment, that fact seemed as clear to Charles as the contours of his pistol’s handle. But he needed to be sure, so he holstered the pistol and followed the men inside the church.

Hugh and Thorburn had laid Norman on the second to last pew. Charles stepped into the last pew and looked over. Hugh, kneeling alongside Norman, didn’t look up at Charles. Hugh spat into a handkerchief and rubbed Norman’s forehead and hair, trying to clean off the blood. Norman’s eyes were closed, his vest buttoned, his blonde beard trimmed. Yes, Charles thought, he was dead. He stepped out of the aisle and pushed open the outer doors. If Hugh hadn’t been there, he might have spit on Norman’s face.

Outside, the skirmish had stopped. Women wove among the crowd of men. A few hobbled off, a few others lay on the ground. People whispered, as though to balance the earlier ruckus. Charles lit a cigar. He was a not a cruel man, and he did not
take his euphoria lightly. It disturbed him but he did not deny it. Norman McLean, a perpetual nuisance to some, a serious rabble rouser to others, could cause no more trouble. Charles was smiling when his daughter, coatless, James and John on either side, approached. Her disheveled appearance tightened his relaxed features. Never would her mother show herself in public like that.

   What— he said.
   Where— Elisabeth said.
   John put a hand on her arm. We wanted to inquire after our tenants, he said. Is Norman all right? We saw he was down.
   Charles blew out a mouthful of smoke. He shook his head at Elisabeth’s hatlessness. He’s no longer our tenant, Charles said. He’s inside, dead.
   Elisabeth sucked in her breath and ran forward. John followed. When James stopped beside Charles, Charles offered him a cigar. James accepted. She’s not normally so high strung, Charles said.
   James lit the cigar and took a drag. She’s a kind woman, he said. He asked after the election—would they reschedule it—and Charles said he was sure they would. Most everyone had cleared off the grounds now, into the church behind them, or friends’ houses or pubs in town. A line of maple trees, their leaves red, swayed at the edge of the clearing. James told Charles there was no procedure in place for rescheduling elections. What would you suggest? Charles asked, interested.
   While James answered in detail, Elisabeth was kissing the dead man’s fingers, cheeks, and eyelids. Hugh, crouched by the end of the pew, looked away from this scene, staring blindly at the blue and red stained glass window. John and Matthew guarded the church door.
Part Four
The morning of Norman’s funeral supper, Hugh took four cuttings from the rose bush outside the front door. He stood close to the bush and held each branch in turn, scrutinizing it, searching for the hardiest ones. With a knife, he cut each of the chosen branches about half of a meter down, and lay the four cuttings on the ground. Kneeling next to the rose bush, he scooped up dirt with a trowel, poured it into a small burlap sack, which sat beside him, carefully nestled the ends of the cuttings inside the dirt, and cinched the sack shut with twine. Carrying it, he went into the house.

Marilla sat at the table, polishing a silver bowl they hadn’t used in years. Tonight, they’d have Norman’s funeral supper here. She didn’t look up as Hugh walked past her into the bedroom. Hugh remembered Clara’s funeral supper, when neighbor women, thinking Marilla was too young to cook, had brought food. Because Marilla had made a feast, they’d eaten leftovers for a week afterward.

After Norman’s service in town, the neighbors had assumed they’d have Norman’s funeral supper at the Cuthbert house and asked Hugh when was convenient. Hugh had consented. They should be finished digging up potatoes by the following Saturday, he’d said. They could have the supper then.

Hugh pulled up the slat on the jewelry box and opened the top drawer and reached inside and took out a roll of bills. He counted out the money and placed it and the small bag of rose cuttings in a larger burlap bag and, his back leaning against the bedpost, tied the bag with twine. He’d considered giving John the bag this morning, but decided that he didn’t want it out of his sight yet. John said he’d stop by the next morning, on his way north. Hugh would give it to him then. The young man planned to put a down payment on a parcel of land for Hugh. If Norman had made the decision to buy land, he himself would go and pay, without an intermediary. And most likely be turned down, because he was Scottish. Why not use his British connections? Hugh
thought. Norman would say he was groveling, but Hugh didn’t view it like that. John was not a superior. And soon the land would be his, and then his association with the Brits would be finished. Or most Brits, anyway. John, he assumed, would continue to hang around.

He took out a black suit vest and smoothed it. Because he was going to speak to Charles that morning, he’d planned to wear it over his loose white shirt. Again, Hugh thought about Norman’s disdain. Go as you are, Norman would say. Why dress up for him? Why, indeed. Respect, perhaps. And though Hugh still respected Charles, today he would be speaking to him, if not as an equal, not as a tenant. Hugh put the suit vest away. He placed the sack between the bed and the chest and walked through the kitchen, where Marilla was kneading dough, and on outside. As he stalked down the road, slowly and with his almost bow-legged, firm stride, his jaw failed to form its usual tautness. Grief had suspended his resoluteness. It was latent, and would return, he knew, but right now he felt like a shipwrecked man bobbing in an open sea, who either couldn’t see land or didn’t know which land was closest. Soon, he would swim somewhere, but for now, although to all except an astute observer he looked composed, he was allowing the waves to push him in any direction, vaguely hoping that their constant lapping would provide some direction.

Hugh had been one of the first to see Norman dead. Norman lay on his side with his legs and arm outstretched, a silhouette of a man running. His hair matted and bloody, his mouth open slightly, like a halfwit. Without thinking, Hugh had knelt beside his friend and pushed his mouth shut.

The Conservatives had voted first, while Norman spoke at a Reformers rally in a large house nearby. Norman then led the Reformers toward the church. Hugh, willing to cast a vote, but reticent to be part of this crowd, brought up the rear. Three Irish
peasants in front of him, who had been drinking, yelled out curses against the English. One of them carried a pitchfork. No wonder the English didn’t want to sell their land to such men, Hugh had thought, examining the tears on the knees and ankles of the Irishmen’s trousers. The men had no restraint, not in their bearing nor their speech. They looked like beggars. And the pitchfork made him leery. Hugh didn’t understand how Norman could stand to work with, and for, such men. As they approached the church, the crowd halted, waiting for the Conservatives to leave.

As they filed out, one of the Conservatives insulted Norman. Something like: Burning farms didn’t work out for you? And Norman slugged the man in the nose or maybe one of the Irishman held up his shovel or pitchfork. Either way, a brawl began. Hugh pushed through the crowd, trying to reach his friend. Most of the men stood around, hesitant, but some rushed forward to join in. Hugh had restrained Norman, once before, at a harvest party when Norman, drunk, thought someone had insulted his dead wife. Norman, Hugh knew, was strong enough to kill someone and rash enough not to think about the consequences until after the act. But Hugh was by far the strongest man in the area. He shoved men aside, unconsciously yelling, Goddamn you, move! By the time he reached the front of the crowd, his friend was dead on the ground, and Thorburn was saying over and over that an Irishman had done it. The brawl, at least near Norman, had ceased. A circle formed around the body. As Hugh squatted down close to his friend’s head, Norman’s presence overwhelmed his senses; he stopped hearing and seeing anyone and anything else.

It had happened every day in the week since his friend’s death; he could no longer taste his breakfast but heard Norman’s voice in the anteroom, he could no longer feel his shovel’s handle but saw Norman stalking through the potato field toward him. Hugh was the kind of man who loved only a few people and also the kind of man who
never thought of love or grief in abstract terms. He thought in terms of physicalness: there was Norman’s horse in their barn, there was Norman’s dog waiting outside their door, there was the bag of apples Norman had given him. Where was Norman’s house? where was Norman’s presence?—Hugh could not acclimate himself to these concrete absences yet.

Hugh stopped under a cedar tree across from the Blythe’s stone house. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. The day wasn’t warm. Hugh’s body was reacting to something internal, not to the world in front him. Another result of grief. A man and lady exited the stone house. The lady, who wore a rose-colored dress, laughed as she took the man’s arm. The couple walked toward the shore. Hugh didn’t know them. The tenants had watched guests arrive from town the last couple of days. Marilla told him they’d come for Elisabeth’s engagement party.

Hugh was trying to look at the house through Norman’s eyes. Not as a stately architectural accomplishment but as a place that demanded and used without providing anything in return. Mrs. Blythe, cradling goldenrod, rounded the corner of the house and entered the front door. She tended a small flower garden, Hugh remembered. And the housemaid grew vegetables. These were the only things that grew near their place. Their barns were devoid of crops, their back field filled with grass, their forest forbidden for tenants to harvest or even enter. The stones to build their house had been taken from the field or the river but the field stood dormant and the river teemed with fish that they never tried to catch. They’re city people, he’d told Norman, excusing their unfarmed land. Then they should stay in the city, Norman had said. They wasted so much here, Hugh admitted to himself. Not waste resulting from trying and making mistakes, as he suspected John, if he acquired land and attempted to farm, would bring about. An ignorant waste, not aware of its own potential or laziness.
As an anger grew inside Hugh, Mrs. Blythe, shed of her flowers, stepped back outside and said his name. He hadn’t thought she’d noticed him.

They met between the tree and the house. She was the kind of woman who met you halfway, Hugh thought. He respected her. She wore a white, pleated dress, her hair rolled up high behind her head. She smiled widely, a smile that reached all the way to her eyes. Unlike her husband, her face was all sincerity; she never wore a mask. She was a lovely woman, inside and out, and Hugh’s anger dissolved, incompatible with her presence. People must work inside the life they’ve got, he thought. If we all fought for our wants with as much fervor as Norman, this whole lot might go up in flames. Yes, he’d come to speak to Charles, he told Mrs. Blythe, and no, he needn’t come in, he could wait here, but she insisted. With all these guests around, she said, his office is the only quiet place.

Hugh had never been inside the stone house. He caught a glance of red plush furniture and a high curtained window in a sitting room on his right. When his shoes left dirt marks on the carpeted stair steps, he regretted his compliance. Charles responded a firm Come in! to Mrs. Blythe’s knock, but when he saw Hugh, he stood up. Goodness, Anna, he said.

He’d like to speak with you privately, Anna said.

Only Anna would bring a tenant to his office, Charles thought. He didn’t even allow them in the house. He looked down at the letter he was drafting to Cecil. Perhaps the proprietor would have heard of the brawl before this letter reached him. Charles wanted Cecil to understand that this small fight did not, in any way, affect the daily productivity of the tenants and the land. *Being far away, it is natural to think of the Island mainly in terms of politics, he had just written. I think like that when in Charlottetown. But every year, after spending time on your lot, I am reminded again of the unchanging nature of the*
tenantry’s disposition and their labor, how a law debated for days in the city has little affect on them. I think, overall, this situation favors us. Charles didn’t want Hugh to see this correspondence and then, with a small smile, he remembered Hugh couldn’t read. His detailed records and antique books meant nothing to this man. Charles sat back down and opened his hand toward Hugh in an preoccupied, directive gesture. Hugh sat across from him.

There was a fire in the fireplace, so low it served more for decoration and atmosphere than warmth. A silver breakfast tray sat on the corner of the desk. The hands of the corner grandfather clock neared ten.

Charles assumed Hugh wanted to speak about Norman, though he didn’t know what about. They had already decided that Matthew would harvest Norman’s potatoes. Charles wanted to offer Matthew the opportunity to rent Norman’s land, but he planned to wait a couple of months before he proposed the idea. He had a score to settle with Norman, but by dying Norman had deprived him of the chance. But mentioning Norman’s name was the furthest thing from Hugh’s mind. Charles, still vocally angry, had forgotten or never known the silence of intense grief.

What would you like to speak with me about? Charles asked. Hugh looked down and around him, clearly uncomfortable, as Charles thought he should be.

Do you mind me asking what here is from England? Hugh asked. The first personal question he’d ever asked Charles. He wouldn’t leave this room until he’d stated his intent, but he couldn’t speak of it yet. He’d rather be rude than feel Charles’s anger. They had been on good terms for many years. And that clock, it looked so much like his own. He wanted to know where it came from.

Charles pulled his body back. Why, almost everything, I suppose, he said. What right did Hugh have to ask him such a question? It reminded him of the night of
the fire, when Hugh had been the only tenant to argue. He had no right then, either, Charles thought.

And they owned many more English items in the city, Hugh thought. The Cuthberts had only four Scottish possessions: the clock, the jewelry box, the tea set, and the rose bush. Charles lived in a little England within the new world. No wonder he couldn’t entertain new world ideas. Yet Norman had accused Hugh of this deficiency, too. We can’t think like our fathers, Norman said. We’re dealing with a different place, a different world. And once, after they’d talked obliquely of women: Go find a new wife, Hugh. You live too much in the past. Who lived more in the past? Hugh thought, men such as Charles, who surrounded themselves by generations of family possessions, or men such as himself, who dwelt on all they’d lost? That clock, he said. It looks like mine.

Charles looked at the clock. He hadn’t thought of its origin in years. I think my father bought it from a clockmaker, he said. Then they sat in silence. Hugh’s eyes studied something out the window. Charles heard the swoosh of wind and the rustle of leaves. Hugh seemed more comfortable while he himself became expectant. What did you want to speak with me about? he asked with authority. Is it about Norman?

Hugh flinched. He wasn’t ready to hear his friend’s name spoken aloud, especially by Charles. In some moments since Norman’s death, Hugh felt as though he’d inherited his friend’s anger toward their agent. Yet, unlike Norman, Hugh didn’t have the capability to sustain extravagant emotions. He had noticed the falling leaves but not his agent’s increased agitation. Grief can miss subtleties that don’t pertain to its obsessions. No, no, he said. I wanted to tell you we’ll be moving, Within the month.
Charles’s eyes widened, as Hugh had imagined they would. His agent would be surprised, angry, and eventually reconciled. Hugh and Cecil Jacobs’s contract had expired; there was nothing, legally, Charles could do.

We’ll pay rent through the end of the year, Hugh said.

Charles glanced down at his letter. A drop of tea blotted the bottom corner. He pressed his thumb to it, irritated. Would he mention this to Cecil and if so, how? What reason did Hugh have to leave? I don’t understand, Charles said.

We’ve found land to buy, Hugh said. We have money to buy it.

Why would you start over at your age?

Matthew will help.

I didn’t know you had enough money saved.

Hugh’s anger resurfaced. For years I’ve told you I have the means to buy the farm, he said.

When Charles turned his face profile and clenched his jaw, Hugh saw for the first time a resemblance between the father and son. It was the look on John’s face when Norman had quizzed him on his political affiliations at the supper table. A look that begged for compromise, that knew but didn’t want to admit the limits of its power.

And I’ve told you that’s not my decision to make, Charles said.

There was more Charles could have done, Hugh knew, but that was the past now. Charles tiptoed around Cecil Jacobs as Hugh had tiptoed around Charles. To point out his agent’s faults would be pointing out his own.

You have a nice farm here. The best on the lot, I think. I just don’t understand, Charles repeated.
It’s not my farm, Hugh said, speaking for himself but also for Norman and his father and Clara’s father, too. Charles was still looking away. Hugh grasped the edge of the desk and leaned forward. We did not come to the new world to rent a farm.

Charles turned his eyes back to Hugh. You knew you would not own a farm when you came here.

We thought we would in twenty years.

These things take time. You will own land. Soon.

Yes, we will. Within a month’s time.

I always thought you were a patient man, Hugh.

Hugh relaxed his grip and sat up straight. There is a point when patience becomes foolishness, he said.

Not when the outcome is inevitable.

It isn’t, Hugh said. For the first time, he truly believed this.

No, it wasn’t, Charles thought. Nothing was inevitable. He wondered whether he’d ever waited on something to the point of foolishness, whether he’d ever had to be years patient for anything at all. Go buy yourself some land then, he said.

Now Hugh looked away. He could hardly believe this permission had been given.

And no need to pay rent after the day you leave, Charles added. You are not obligated to me through the end of the year.

Hugh looked back at his agent. Thank you, sir, he said. Charles was, after all, a decent man. Good day to you. With one more glance at the clock, Hugh took his leave.

After staring at the closed door, Charles looked down and reread the letter. Should he revise on the basis of Hugh’s decision? No, Hugh was an exception. Norman had been an exception. Most tenants had no money saved and no other way to earn
money and thus could not leave even if they wanted to. He tapped his pen against the edge of the table. He wanted to bring up his desire to own, and not only manage, the lot but decided to wait until his visit to England. He thought of Hugh’s transparent eyes. How the simple, explicit joy on his tenant’s face had seemed like ecstasy compared to his usual stoicism. Hugh would be content on his new plot of land; it was the only thing he’d ever wanted, and Charles envied him this ignorant happiness. He himself did not live an unhappy life, but he was never satisfied. As he grew older, intellectual endeavors appealed to him more than physical adventures, but either way he was insatiable. He was proud of this quality even as he despised it. He rang the servant bell. He would not finish the letter today. The guests would all be awake by now, and he had duties toward them.

Eleanor! he yelled. Eleanor, why in god’s name haven’t you cleared the breakfast tray! He was upset not at her nor at Hugh but at the fact that for him in this life there would never be an end to want, never an arrival, only temporary attainments. His limitless ambition, that had thrilled him as a young man, gave him a sudden weariness. He wanted to lay his head on the desk. Instead, he stood up, took the tray, and shoved it into Eleanor’s hands as she rushed through the door. He would get his jacket, he thought. He would show his guests the lot.

It had been simpler than he expected, Hugh thought as he walked home. Charles had not exploded. The understanding between them had faltered but remained. He raised his arm in greeting to Thorburn as he walked by his farm. That man would continue to grovel at Charles’s feet, and Hugh was glad he wouldn’t be around to watch him. For so long, Hugh had thought he wanted this land and no other, but really, he realized now, he would be happy with any farmable plot, as long as it was his own. He couldn’t imagine being more pleased if he had been given permission to buy his
current plot. He and Matthew would leave as soon as John returned. They would build a cabin and a barn. His neighbors would help them transport their belongings and crops to the new place. It would be hard work but it could be done. The first snow was probably two months away. They had time. The clarity and specificity in his plans faded as he approached his farm. Norman was not around to tell the good news, and he would not consider it good news if Hugh told him. It was easier to dismiss Norman’s opinions when his friend was alive.

After Norman burned his land, Hugh hadn’t seen him until the day of the election, the day of Norman’s death.

Are you insane? Hugh had asked, arms crossed. He and Norman had stood outside of the townhouse, prior to the rally. Norman’s potatoes might be salvaged but that was all. The waste angered Hugh so much that he couldn’t return to the burnt land after his first two inspections. Norman had gone too far.

Norman looked over Hugh’s shoulder, nodding his beard or opening his hand to people entering the church. His energy expanded around a group of people. When you want something, he said in a low voice, his small mouth seeming not to open, you go so far and no farther. I go until I gain what I want.

What did you gain? We’ve all lost in this.

You are a literal man, Hugh.

Goddamn you, Norman. Do you want to own land?

Yes.

John says he has connections up north. Could help us both buy a plot.

The insufferable superiority of the Brits.

You like that boy.

He’s a boy. He doesn’t know a damn thing. I’m doing politics for now.
You’re a farmer, Norman.

No. I was a tenant. If I ever become a farmer, I’ll become one without British assistance. Norman looked away from Hugh, at the crowd. How could I lead these people if I agreed to that?

It wasn’t only the waste, Hugh admitted. The Cuthberts had stayed in that cabin when they first arrived from Scotland, while they built their own place. As the highest point on the lot, the view from the McLean farm reminded the boy Hugh of the view from the Scottish cliffs, of home. He had soon learned to know and love the McLean farm and land, too, before he knew or loved his own. Now the house was a pile of charred wood and half of the pine grove near the river had burned down. Only raw land and the ocean view remained. The latter did not remind Hugh of the old world like it used to. Before he’d become an adolescent, he’d stopped considering Scotland home.

By the time Hugh reached the farm, it was midmorning, a hazy sun shining through a cloudy sky. Past the shorn wheat and oat fields he walked, land that after they left would be patched with unplanned, arbitrary barley here or wheat over there. He remembered, soon after he’d married, when Norman helped him clear this still-forested section. After they cut down the trees, Hugh, Clara, Norman, and Helen each sat on a fresh stump, legs crossed, laughing and eating their midday meal. Light green spring sprouts surrounded them. Since his wife’s death, Norman had assisted the Cuthberts only during harvest. For a long time, Hugh realized, he had been alone in his farming. For a long time, the land had not been Norman’s first priority.

Hugh passed Matthew, who stood knees bent, arms leaning against a shovel, resting. His son was a more than competent farmer but had not worked through enough seasons to seem an equal. Matthew looked up at Hugh and immediately looked
down at the potato patch. The unfamiliar blush and shame on his son’s face prompted Hugh to touch his own cheeks, on which he felt tears. He was not only crying; his whole upper body convulsed. Once conscious of it, he was able to stop. He walked in an overly controlled, upright manner toward the barn, afraid of himself for the first time in his life. That his body could do something of which his mind was unaware. He had never known this division before.

Marilla scrubbed a tablecloth in the creek behind the house. She had risen earlier than usual and in darkness boiled water on the hearth. She had carried the pot of water outside and dumped it into a larger pot, dropped into the water soda crystals and sheets, an apron and a dress, Da and Matthew’s shirts, a tablecloth she wanted to use that evening. She had boiled two more pots of water and poured them over the laundry. While it soaked, she set three loaves of bread to rise. Now she leaned over the creek, an elbow resting on the bank, the other hand in the water, scrubbing the tablecloth with a wooden-handled brush. Her braids pinned on top of her head, cheeks red, sleeves pushed up past her elbows, the scents of soda and creek water vying in her nostrils. After she finished scrubbing, she would beat the tablecloth with the backside of the brush, dunk it deep into the water to rinse out the soap, and lay it to dry on the grass behind her. This may be the last time I do laundry in this creek, she thought. In a couple weeks we will be gone.

Before her mother became bedridden, she and a friend did their laundry here together. One woman would scrub, the other would beat, and then they’d give it to Marilla, a child bobbing in the creek. She’d drag the laundry behind her as she swam out into the center. Swimming was as simple as walking to her, and holding up the laundry as well as her body a welcome challenge. If she swam too fast and let go, she
grabbed it before it sank or floated away. Curtains or sheets were heaviest, but she’d never lost anything. When she no longer smelled soap on the laundry, she swam it back to the shore, where her mother and her friend gossiped and laughed. In this way she learned work could be part pleasure.

She flipped over the brush and began to smack the backside against the tablecloth. She no longer had boundless energy; she was no longer a child. She was very tired, from work or sadness she didn’t know. There was something to be said of expecting a loved one’s death, she thought. A year before her mother died, her father’s sad resolve had informed Marilla that Clara would not survive. Then came a period of drudgery. Marilla didn’t know how to do the tasks she was supposed to do, and every day she listened to her mother cry. Weeks and even months before her mother’s death, Marilla caught herself, in her worst moments, thinking that if her mother must die, why didn’t she die more quickly. When her death came, it seemed natural, and a relief.

Norman, Marilla doubted she’d ever believe he was gone forever. In the early spring she’d wait for him to return from the ice boats, during harvest suppers she’d listen for his voice. That’s what all three of them had been doing all week, she realized. Listening for a ghost. She sat the brush down and, holding the tablecloth in front of her, leaned as far out over the creek as she could without falling, dunking the tablecloth again and again, swirling it around to rid it of soap. She balanced herself on her knees and tips of her toes and unconsciously bit her lower lip. She hadn’t seen John all week, either. Before Norman’s death, she thought of him primarily immediately before and after his visits, as she would think of a summer rainstorm when she smelled it coming and again after, when drops glistened on her vegetable vines. Now she thought of him all the time; her mind seemed in perpetual drought.
She pulled the tablecloth out of the water, rocked backward from her toes to the balls of her feet, and stood all the way up, twisting the tablecloth to ring it out. She flapped it open and lay it beside the other laundered items and sat back down on the grass. She pulled her bare feet under her black cotton dress, hugged her knees to her chest, and looked at the creek, which had seemed so much wider ten years ago. In childhood so many things in the world seemed large before they shrunk to their actual size in adulthood. The creek had been there, the same width, behind the house all along. Red maple leaves floated in the water. Above her the tree’s branches were half-bare. She slid her toes from the bank into the creek. The cold water jarred her, the air around her was also cool. That was fine; she wasn’t in the mood to be refreshed. Gasping at the cold, she allowed the water to reach her ankle, her calf, her knees, her thigh.

The guests arrived in the muted late-afternoon. The sky had promised rain but hadn’t delivered, the first comment of many as they came through the door. Marilla, wearing a black muslin dress, greeted them. She placed their dishes either in the pantry or on the table. She thought it odd and apt that the tenants refused to eat in their house when Norman was alive but now, after his death, showed no fear. Da sat in the rocking chair near the fire and talked to whoever approached him. He had placed a large log in the back of the fire, which would burn through the night. Matthew had snuck off to the barn, his customary during gatherings. Guests soon filled the house and spilled over into the front yard and behind the house, near the creek.

On the freshly cleaned tablecloth sat seasoned baked cod, cooked potatoes and squash, sliced cucumbers and tomatoes. Marilla had stowed fresh wild berries and half-a-dozen pies in the cupboard. By the time they dished up supper, everyone held a mug of wine or beer. One bottle of wine tasted like vinegar, but Marilla whisked it away to
the cupboard before anyone else discovered it. The women talked about the Blythe’s guests’ styles of dress, a tenant who had just birthed twins, the prediction that the cold weather would set in early this year. In the chest in the bedroom, Marilla found a wooden top and gave it to the children to play with.

In the sitting room the men asked Hugh if it were true, that he was leaving, and he said yes, as soon as possible. He rocked in the rocking chair he’d made for Clara, arms on the arm rest, shoulder’s bent, so exhausted from grief he put up no pretense in front of these men. He did not reveal that John was helping them secure land, however, he only said someone was selling up north, and he’d saved enough money to buy. Two men volunteered to help him move, and he said yes, he’d appreciate that. A half-dozen more volunteered to come up for a barn raising, if need be. In addition to or as a result of his grief, there was an unsettledness in him, which had been there all week. There was also an undercurrent of joy from that morning, as well as a sense that all this had happened before. As a boy, he’d watched his father discuss plans to leave Scotland, and reactions were then, as now, variable. Some had volunteered to help, others had openly disapproved, still others had stood back, indifferent or silently disapproving. There is no better place than here, some had said. It’s a myth that the new world holds more fertile land. Perhaps it is, Hugh’s father had said, but I would rather own ten acres of rocky soil than rent thirty acres in paradise. Thorburn was one of the silently disapproving this evening. He stood in between the kitchen and sitting room, looking back and forth between the men and women, arms across his chest.

Later, the conversation shifted from Hugh’s impending move to stories about Norman. The log cutting races he’d had with grown men while still an adolescent, the laughs he’d gotten one spring from shaking hands with friends and watching their facial expressions—he hadn’t first told them he’d lost a finger that winter from frostbite.
When Helen and he became engaged, women warned her she couldn’t tame him. I know I can’t, she’d said. I’m hoping he’ll have the opposite effect on me. Hugh stopped rocking, as though he couldn’t move and listen at once. They were a practical, predictable people, he thought. Norman had been an anomaly among them. Hugh suspected years from now they’d tell exaggerated tales about his exploits more often than they relayed stories of Biblical heroes such as Joshua or David. After the women served pie, they joined the men, and the sitting room became so cramped that no one could take a step in any direction without bumping someone else. By now, it was dark outside; the only light came from the fire and the sconces Marilla had lit along the walls.

When Hugh went to fetch the whiskey bottle in the pantry, Thorburn followed him. Hugh had drunk whiskey every night in the past week, less to drink than because he and Norman had drunk together out of the same bottle a few days before his friend’s death. Somehow this helped him, to toast with and to the ghost of his friend.

You want whiskey? he asked Thorburn, as he poured himself a glass.

No, Thorburn said. He raised up his beer mug. He stepped forward from the archway between the rooms.

You got your potato crop in? Hugh asked.

We got it in, Thorburn said.

Cheers, Hugh said. The men toasted. Thorburn’s jaw twitched, and his eyes roved the kitchen, looking at the pies on the counter and each wine bottle in turn. Hugh knew there was something Thorburn wanted to tell him so he waited for the man to begin. Thorburn’s farm bordered his and, although he wasn’t friends with him, he would miss his presence.

You know I was there when Norman died, he said.

I know it, Hugh said.
I saw the man hit him, Thorburn said.
Hugh hadn’t known this. He leaned back against the counter. Could you identify him?
Perhaps. Probably not. I was behind them. But he attacked Norman so forcefully. . . .
He mistook him for a Conservative.
Perhaps. But everyone knows Norman. . . .
They were all drunk. Those damn Irish. They wouldn’t have known their own father from a Frenchman.
Perhaps. But I heard a bunch of them, in the church beforehand, saying things like: That’s a good sum of money. I’d do it if I was you. I thought they were talking about selling something but after Norman’s death I thought otherwise.
As Thorburn paused, Hugh took a sip of whiskey. He continued to gaze at the man.
I thought maybe Charles paid someone to kill Norman, Thorburn said. Have you suspected that?
Hugh squared his jaw and bit the inside of his lip. No, he hadn’t.
I didn’t want to tell everyone. What can we do, anyway? But you’re leaving and you were his best friend. . . .
Marilla stood in the entryway, her arms folded against her black dress. They want to borrow your fiddle, she said.
Certainly, Hugh said. You know where it is.
She cocked her head. Are you all right? She had never before asked him this question.
Yes, he said. It was a lie, but how else could he respond to such a question from his own child. I might take a walk, he said.

All right, she said, and left.

Where are you going? Thorburn asked.

To the shore, Hugh said. Perhaps.

Thorburn squinted. They viewed a man who walked without a destination with distrust, Hugh thought. As they should. In his current state, he didn’t trust himself. I appreciate you sharing your suspicions, Hugh said. Although I doubt they’re true. He drained the last of his whiskey and sat the glass down on the table next to the bottle. He walked by Thorburn and through the sitting room, in which the quieted crowd waited for music. In the anteroom, he took his brown jacket from a peg and went outside.

The night was very dark. As he walked past the storage barn, Hugh noted the light of Matthew’s lantern. He thought about helping Matthew in whatever work his son was doing, but decided against it. He walked west across the entire lot, passing more than a dozen farms, until he came to Norman’s burnt fields. It was only the third time he’d seen them. Charles and he both hated that Norman had done this, and Hugh hated that he agreed with Charles. If Charles had wanted to kill Norman, Hugh thought, he probably would’ve hired someone else to do it. He could recognize the impulse in the agent—avoidance or cowardliness, because he himself had the same inclinations. The site still smelled of fire and ash. He walked the path between Norman’s and the Owen’s that led to the shore. It had been years since he’d walked on these rocks. Since he’d stopped playing there as a child, there was no reason to go down to the shore.
When Hugh first moved to the Island, Norman’s father had told him their lot contained a secret beach. Young Hugh had searched for a week until he found it, sand surrounded on all four sides by high red rocks. For a few minutes, he’d been pleased. He dragged his feet to form paths, he stuck his head into caves and admired strange rock formations. Then, suddenly, he felt lost. He didn’t remember how he’d gotten there. Even after he’d climbed out it took him a moment to recover his bearings: At what end of the beach was he? Why couldn’t he hear the sea? Later, he returned to play there again and again and still later, he told young Norman to search it out. Norman had come back the same day, triumphant, and described the rock formation that looked like tables stacked at angles on top of one other. Hugh doubted his friend had experienced moments of panic like his own.

There were plenty of reasons Charles would want Norman dead, Hugh realized, but he’d never thought his agent had bad character. At his core Charles seemed a generous man. If Hugh made such a statement to Norman, his friend would correct him. You are the generous one, Norman would say, and it blinds you to the faults in others. Hugh remembered glancing up in the church, while kneeling next to a dead Norman. Charles stood above them, his face full of joy. Whether or not Charles had had a hand in killing Norman, Hugh begrudged him that exaltation. What right had he to be happy at any man’s death? There was no wind yet the sea seemed unusually loud. Hugh walked from rock to rock, staying near the gradually sloping cliff, not making his way toward the sand and sea. At the end of the beach, where the cliff had dropped off to ground level with the rocks, Hugh stepped across the tree line and into the woods.

These were the forbidden woods near the Blythe’s stone house. He had never been in them, although Norman had, many times. Coming to the edge of it together,
Norman used to step over and dance around like a rebellious child. Hugh imagined Norman’s jig so clearly that he could see his friend, his feet whirring, his mouth open in laughter. Hugh shook his head, eliminating the image, and walked on. In the late autumn or early winter Norman would cut down pines and gather kindling here, too. The trees were less dense than in the woods behind Hugh’s house or beyond Norman’s land, but their undergrowth of ferns seemed familiar. The woods ended near the barn. Hugh was seeing it from a different angle than he had that morning, or anytime, really. The stone house behind the barn and beyond that a field of dead cornstalks. The barn’s emptiness came to his mind again, the futility of a building unused. He turned back into the woods so as not to look at it, and there was Norman again, cutting down a large tree. You’re in full view of the house, Hugh said out loud. Charles will notice. Norman didn’t respond. He can’t hear me, Hugh thought. And I can’t hear his axe. This was the worst result of a loved one’s death, Hugh remembered as though for the first time. To receive no counter to his own speech. If only Norman would disagree! he thought. His friend would say: I want Charles to notice, as I wanted him to notice the fire. I knew he’d know that I set it. The axe cut deep into the tree now, and Norman did not look up. Hugh looked at the barn and looked back. His friend was gone. He went to the tree and examined it for axe indents. There were none. He kicked at the trunk, over and over, until his toes ached. His boot made no marks.

Hugh turned and walked inside the Blythe’s barn. A horse whinnied in a far stall. He noted the bales of hay lining the walls. In his mind’s eye, he saw the flames which burned, right now, in his own hearth. He imagined these bales alight with a similar blaze. Probably the bales would catch the entire barn on fire, perhaps not, but he intended to light them. He imagined Charles’s face when he saw the destruction. Furious, as after Norman had burnt his land, but also anxious and bewildered, because
his agent would not know who had set the fire. Charles would never suspect him. His agent had only today done Hugh a large favor, and Hugh had never in any way rebelled. In a few weeks I will be gone, Hugh thought. And there are some things, Charles, you will never know. Hugh opened the far stall, harnessed the horse, and led him far enough into the forest that the barn on fire wouldn’t startle him.

Charles was enjoying his solitary evening cigar at the edge of the cliff, between his house’s back field and the sea. Most days he’d watch the soft shadows on the red rocks at dusk, but today his guests had prevented him from slipping away until long after dark. The overcast evening blocked a view of the sea; instead he watched the lantern at his feet, his cigar smoke, his wrinkled, veiny hands. After their dance that evening, Anna had raised his hand to her mouth and kissed it, a gesture she’d made after every dance since their engagement dance, in England, twenty-eight years ago. Her steady love amazed him. He’d accepted long ago that you love those you love for mostly irrational reasons, yet he still looked for logic in her love for him.

It upset Charles he had missed the evening light. Routines gave order to his days; he liked to know what would happen when. Charles had always been like this, even as a child. He hated reading a novel the first time. He liked his second and third read through, when he could relax, not anxious over matters of plot. Yet the repetitive nature of tenant life didn’t satisfy him. He wanted order within and near him and variety outside of himself. There were unforeseen complications with the likes of Norman or Hugh, but there was little pleasurable variety here.

Today, in his friends’ presence, he’d relaxed for the first time in weeks. Out here in the country, he felt isolated, the one man in the area tenants could look up to or blame, the only one who experienced rebellious tenants. While he and a friend rode
together around the lot, the friend had told him how he himself had dealt with half-a-dozen Normans, men who hadn’t paid rent for a year. He’d evicted all of them. One had shot at the rent collector, who, in revenge, had crippled the tenant’s horse. After his friend’s stories, Charles was able to inwardly laugh at the apple-pelting incident, although his pride wouldn’t allow him to share it. Norman could have thrown the whole apple crop at him, but what real power had he had?

This evening, John had told his plans to an audience of middle-aged men. Charles scowled at him from across the room until he realized his more progressive friends applauded John’s plan and by extension his own encouragement. More men of their class should make such decisions, they said. It showed solidarity with the tenants. After all, this was the new world, not Europe. Here, we all should know how to work with our hands. A business acquaintance had walked over and clapped Charles on the back, praising him for his ingenuity. You know I have a daughter John’s age, his friend said softly. Nancy. He pointed out a young lady across the room. Maybe we could form an alliance of sorts. Charles said he’d talk the matter over with Anna and accepted without comment all of the undeserved compliments. Even thinking of his son’s strenuous ambitions tired him out. He himself looked forward to winter in the haven of his townhouse, quiet evenings of reading or dinner parties with intense, informed political debates. Maybe he should run for some minor office. Anna had always encouraged him to, citing his nuanced understanding of politics. He preferred helping other politicians, working behind the scenes. But soon one child would be married, the other out to seek his fortune. Perhaps it was time to stretch himself, to employ his ambition in another realm.
John came to Marilla in darkness, as he often did, tapping on the bedroom widow. The guests had left and dishes been put away, and Da had not yet returned. The air in the house, heavy with stories and dissonant emotions, felt claustrophobic, and she was glad to meet John under the oak tree. It was a breezy night, cool but not yet cold. The clouds, hovering low and across the sky all day, had not cleared. They could not see the moon. She took his hand, and for the last time they walked together on the road between their houses.

They stopped a hundred meters from the stone house. Light shone from the downstairs windows. Someone was playing the piano poorly, tapping out a thin melody without chordal accompaniment. Their hands’ grip loosened, and they stepped apart, their fingers barely touching. The party drew Marilla as a spectacle would, not someplace to live inside but something to observe. John had slipped away when the guests had become drunk enough that they wouldn’t notice his absence. He wondered if a tipsy Elisabeth played the piano or one of her friends. He imagined the quietness of the morning after, playfully saluting guests sprawled on couches or the floor before he went on his journey. Bothersome people looked so peaceful in sleep, it was a pity they ever woke up. He tightened his grip on Marilla’s hand and led her, not as she thought he would, on the path to the shore, but to the barn, which he opened while cursing the recalcitrant door.

She had never been inside this barn. She knew a horse lived in the far stall and smelled hay, above her, in the loft and in bails lining two of the walls. Otherwise the barn was empty. No, there was a stool and on it a dress. Marilla dropped John’s hand to go stand over it. Pale pink, with flounces from the waist to the bottom.

It was Elizabeth’s idea, John said with sudden embarrassment. She said she invited you to the party and you said you had nothing to wear.
Had she said that? Marilla couldn’t remember. Picking up the dress, she examined the fine even stitching behind each flounce, so tight it must have been made in England, by a machine.

Will you come? he asked. He wanted to see her in the dress. Maybe they would dance. If Father caught them, he could blame Elisabeth. Or maybe he’d tell the truth. He’d decide that later. By her concentrated admiration, he deduced the dress made her happy. Because she imagined wearing it or because its beauty fascinated her, he didn’t know. I’ll step outside while you change, he said.

She put the dress back on the stool, gently, using two arms, as one would place a baby in a cradle. Her dark eyes steadied him. I can’t dress in that tonight.

Why not?

Not the night of Norman’s funeral supper, she said. Some mourning women wore too much black for too long. She thought this practice maudlin. But to wear this dress a week after Norman’s death, on the day of his funeral supper, and to attend a party hosted by his enemies, this she could not do. She had more propriety and loyalty than that.

He’d find it amusing, John said. For you to disguise yourself and deceive the enemy. Even as he began to try to convince, he knew she wouldn’t change her mind. He thought about a dream he’d had that past spring. He and Marilla were dancing in the stone house. He liked her dress but couldn’t remember whether it looked like this one. She kept looking over his shoulder, beyond him. When John turned to see where she looked, he only saw only the white wall or the punch bowl or another couple. Once, when he turned, he woke up, sat up, and looked out the window at other students walking to class. He didn’t hurry. He felt no desire to impress his tutors anymore, and
time was more fluid than he’d once thought. He’d clutched at the dream, trying to retrace it or live inside it for a few more minutes.

Everyone told stories about him tonight, Marilla said. Did you know he used to break unbreakable horses? Da told about that. When he was your age. After he’d broken a dozen or so, he decided he knew how to do that, and moved on to learn something else. Never broke another horse again.

Sounds like something my father would do, John said.

You know what Thorburn claimed? That your father hired that Irishman to kill Norman.

How ridiculous, John said.

I thought so, too, she said. Thorburn needed to blame someone. She traced the dress’ scooping neckline with her finger. You’ve never lost someone, have you? she asked. There was pride in her voice, and for the first time her distance repelled instead of intrigued him. I mean, she added, no one you’ve loved has died.

She knew no one had; he’d told her his whole childhood. The question irritated him, because it presumed he hadn’t loved Norman. He had, he just hadn’t known him as long. He wished he could have been at the funeral supper. He wanted to hear the stories. And even if Norman hadn’t died, there were so many ways to lose someone, he thought. He had lost his father when he decided to deceive him. He would lose Marilla if she decided not to be his wife. Wasn’t it, in some ways worse than their dying, to be unable to be near someone alive who you loved?

She studied him again. He was not thinking of Norman. She didn’t hold it against him, but he needn’t pretend otherwise. His mind was far away, in the future or a different place, somewhere neither of them had been. He was imagining what he would do there. It was all so foolish, this thinking about the future. He became unaware
of those around him. If this is what having expectations meant, she was glad she’d never learned how to have them. She never expected a specific situation; she simply expected herself to act properly in whatever situation she was in. When she raised her hand from the dress to straighten her hair he clasped it between both of his.

John wanted something from her, if not a dance, something more. If I prove myself as a farmer these next two years, he said. Will you marry me?

In the silence, they heard a loud marching piano tune, yells and laughter.
I’ll answer after we settle in up north, she said. Your father’s presence makes me think it impossible.

Up north it will be possible, he said.
Looking him in the eyes, she gave him a slow nod. He took this as a yes, which was fine with her, because she meant it as one.

He pulled her to him in a gentle yet firm hug, feeling the length of her body against his for the first time. He did not kiss her yet. His mind was so full of the future. Tomorrow morning, for the first time in his life, he would be acting completely on his own initiative.

It’ll be rough for a few years, he whispered into her hair. But soon you’ll forget about all these years of being poor.

Poor, Marilla repeated. She pulled back from his embrace. She had never thought of the Cuthberts as poor. Some of the natives were poor, some of the French hired hands whose children ran around barefoot. We aren’t poor, she said.

Oh, Marilla, he said, squeezing her hands. Yes, you are.

She was more mystified than offended. She thought of the wad of money in the jewelry box, money that Da would give John tomorrow morning. Within a year, they’d owe nothing on their new plot of land. She pulled her hands away. She had never tried
to get close to his world, she had never even thought to desire it. Yet here she was, by this fancy dress, in an unused barn. I need to go home, she said.

What’s wrong? John asked.

I’ll see you in the morning, Marilla said. She needed to think. She had always loved John and Elisabeth apart from their family and class; those things had seemed peripheral. Yet tonight Elisabeth had assumed that, provided with the right dress, Marilla would come to the party. And John had assumed that she wanted to earn more money and lead a more comfortable life. Well, why not? It was the assuming that bothered her, not the assumption.

I’m walking you home, he said and took her hand. Instead of stepping forward, she turned toward him.

So you think Norman was poor? she asked. And Da?

Yes, Marilla, he said. Why was she upset over this? he thought. I’m not looking down on them, he added. It’s a fact. After your mother died, you needed to hire help. If you had had more money, you would have. He examined her creased brow and dark eyes, which were not thinking about him or their possible life together. She was preoccupied with these people and this place. She never wanted anything, he thought. That was her problem. She never wanted more than the meager amount she had.

Every year, Marilla knew, Da had put away money to buy the land. She supposed he could have used that to hire help; she’d never thought of this before. John wasn’t there, he didn’t know what it had been like. She pulled away, flailing her arms as she spoke. How dare you tell us how to use our money, she said.

I’m not— he said.
Work is not a game, she said. Farming is how we survive. Norman worked on the ice boats to earn money. Whatever happens up north, you can come back to this. An empty barn, plenty of money.

Marilla—he said. He grabbed her forearm as she walked away. She relaxed in his grasp but didn’t turn her head. After tomorrow, he said, I’m accepting no more money from my father. Ever. Do you understand?

She turned and studied him again. His thin boyish jaw, square and stubborn, his half-formed shoulder muscles like protruding wings. She believed him. She knew what his life would be like without his family’s money, it was he himself who didn’t understand. I’ll see you in the morning, John, she said.

Lightning bolts lit up the sky, the sea, and the red rocks. Charles, in preparation to go inside, tossed away his cigar butt. Lightning was beautiful but dangerous, and he never took risks in the face of real danger. Others thought he did. He left them with this enticing illusion while he himself gathered success after success by living on an edge but never stepping over it. Norman had stepped over it. Look where it left him. Charles turned toward the house, lifting his legs as he stalked through the high grass.

He saw a man emerge from his woods when he was between it and the stone house. A bulky tenant, in loose clothing. Norman—Charles thought. No. His ghost. Charles took off running. The engaged couple was kissing at the corner of the house. Elisabeth broke away from James as her father went by. She had never seen her father run.

He grabbed his pistol from the entryway cupboard and came back outside. Elisabeth saw its shine. Charles vaguely heard Elisabeth yell at him. Now, the man walked toward the barn. Who was this, scuttling around his land? Charles thought.
Only Norman would have the audacity to go into the forbidden woods. He should have shot that man when he came by a month ago, after Norman had vandalized his house and scared his rent collector. Norman had been killed by a no-name Irishman. He himself should have challenged Norman to a duel. Then the other tenants might think twice about questioning his authority. If this were Norman, the ghost would keep walking when hit. If it weren’t, the tenant’s disobedience deserved a wound. Charles halted and lifted the gun.

Father! Elisabeth said again. She remembered him palming his pistol at the election brawl, but he hadn’t seemed so desperate then. She was beside him as he aimed at the man’s leg and yanked his arm down as he pulled the trigger.

Goddamn, Charles said. He flailed his arm, dropping the pistol. By the time he wriggled free, guests had gathered. Some yelled his name or Elisabeth’s. He picked up the pistol and fumbled it. It was wet. Elisabeth grabbed his arm again.

Goddamn, Elisabeth, he said. This time he easily shook her off him. He saw Anna before he felt her, although she was holding his other arm.

Norman— he said.

Is dead, Anna said. That’s not him.

I know it, he said. His body shook, and he dropped the pistol again. Who was this then? He strained forward, to see not to harm, but his wife and daughter pulled him back.

Still holding her husband’s arm, Anna turned her body halfway toward the crowd. Go inside, she told them. Go on. Her calm hostess voice had acquired an edge. People obeyed. James brought up the rear, staring anyone down who turned his head.

One strong shake, and Charles was free from both his wife and daughter. He scooped up the pistol and Anna’s lantern and ran to the barn. He lifted up the lantern
and kicked at the high grass. The man should be laying there. He swore Elisabeth grabbed his arm after he’d fired. Again, a ghost came to mind. No, Charles thought. Not that.

Where is he? he asked. Where the hell—

Anna and Elisabeth ran up beside him, both breathing hard in their tight party dresses. What’s wrong? Anna said. A tenant was here. Now he’s gone.

It’s our land, Charles said.

What’s wrong? Anna said again. Wanting to look in his eyes, she yanked at his arm to turn him toward her. He shook her off.

Charles went around to the main road. He squatted down. Seeing a fresh track, he yelled Anna and Elisabeth over.

There were two of them, he said.

The prints are facing toward us, Elisabeth said. Probably Marilla and John, she thought. She hadn’t seen her brother at the party for a while. Perhaps they were at the shore.

Then I’ll see where they came from, Charles said. He followed the tracks toward the tenants’ farms. Anna linked an arm with his, almost dragged along by her husband’s quick stride. Elisabeth turned away to look for John and Marilla. Maybe they’d come in at the sound of gunfire. Tonight, even more than most nights, wasn’t the time for Father to see them.

The moment the bullet hit his thigh, Hugh had tumbled from his squatting position to his side, as though someone had kicked his feet out from under him. Marilla and John stepped out of the barn and stood over him, Marilla dropping to her knees at his side.

My leg, Hugh said.
John looked up the small rise, toward the house, at the lantern. He heard his mother’s voice. He lifted Hugh up, holding his armpits from behind. Help me, he said. Marilla steadied Hugh’s back as they dragged him into the barn. Hugh groaned.

In the barn, Marilla cupped her hands around Hugh’s ankle and followed the leg toward his waist until her hands were covered in blood. She took off her petticoat and wrapped it around his leg. Immediately, it too became soaked. She felt alone before she looked up and noticed John was gone. She remembered the dress, turned her head, stepped forward, and seized it from the stool. She tore off the inner cotton layers first, cinching up the torn strips near his groin. She had just discerned the wound was on the lower thigh, right above the knee, when John returned with a lantern. A sudden blackness covered her eyes. Why in god’s name had he brought a light? He kneeled over Da, holding the lantern up over Da’s body.

No, Marilla said. He did not hear her. No, she said again. Go away.

He scooted backward on his knees. She couldn’t see his face. I don’t want that, she said, motioning at the lantern.

We need to see— John said.

They’ll see us, she said. Take it away, she said. Go on.

Once John left, Marilla waited for her eyes to adjust back to the darkness.

What were you doing? she asked Da. He seemed calmer than he had since Norman died, certainly more relaxed than after supper.

Lighting a fire, he said.

What?

I wanted to set the barn on fire. He said it as though he’d said he’d been in the field, digging potatoes. She twisted her torso around and sniffed for smoke.
Wasn’t able, he said. Didn’t have time. . . . His voice faded. His eyelids fluttered. The pain, she thought. She no longer could feel where his bloody clothes stopped and hers began.

The bullet? she said.

Da opened his eyes. It grazed my thigh, he said.

Marilla nodded, relieved. She stepped outside and looked up the rise. A figure, John, stood between the barn and house. Everyone else seemed to have gone inside.

After Marilla let Da rest, she helped him stand. She led him on paths through the fields instead of on the main road. Twice lightning lit up the sky as he leaned against her, hobbling home. There was no rain or even thunder.

Marilla didn’t sleep the rest of the night. In the early morning, she pulled back her bedcovers and rested, dress still on, eyes closed, until she heard Matthew leave to let the cattle out. Da slept uncovered on the bed in the room’s opposite corner. His pale chest moved in and out. Matthew had given him whiskey while she cleaned the wound. As she stood and walked over and pulled a quilt over his bare chest, her neck and shoulders ached from where he’d leaned against her. The blood-soaked petticoat and inner layers of the dress were bunched at the foot of the bed. Between the bedroom and the sitting room, she stood leaning her head against the doorframe, staring at the tea things she’d left on the table, until she heard John’s voice. She’d wondered if he’d come by, as they’d planned. He had entered the anteroom and was knocking on the inner door.

I’m headed up north, he said. I need your father’s money.

Marilla stood up straight and felt the top her head, stray pieces of hair broken off from her bun. Your father shoots my father one night, she thought. I trust you with
our life savings the next morning. The irony was not lost on her. She took out the hairpins and, sticking them in her mouth, started to unbraid her hair. She wished Matthew were there.

    Marilla, John said, knocking again. Are you there?
    I’m here, she said, her voice garbled.
    Open the door, will you?
    She didn’t respond.

    Hear me out then. Father was drunk last night. That’s no excuse but so was Hugh I think. What was he doing around there? How is he this morning? Elisabeth really saved the day. She pulled down father’s arm when he was aiming the pistol. She’s always doing things like that…

    Marilla, leaning her back against the doorframe, ran her fingers through her wavy hair. There was a kind of peacefulness to his ramblings. She could comfortably lose herself in them for a while, it didn’t matter what he said. His words never clarified situations, but he sincerely tried to fill the spaces, to explain the unexplainable, and she appreciated the effort. She wondered if she loved him or only his fluency, if this is why she’d yearned for him after Norman’s death. He had already said more words than she’d heard all night. After she had brought Da in, Matthew had directed her on how to care for Da. He was worried, but taciturn as usual. I’ll get him some whiskey, Matthew had said. And later: Re-bandage him.

    When she opened the door, John paused mid-sentence. Her eyes were bloodshot, wrinkles criss-crossed on her black dress. He had never seen her with her hair down. It softened her features and made her seem childlike, unsure. He stepped over the threshold and kissed her. Her mouth was gentle, unguarded. As he wrapped his arms around her, a thin, hard object passed from her mouth to his. He stepped out
of the embrace and spat it out. A hairpin. She coughed out the other one. Together, they looked at them on the floor.

Would you like some tea? she asked.

Yes, he said. Thank you.

He didn’t speak as she cleared the table, rinsed the teacups, and sat one in front of him. Her movements weren’t quick and efficient, as usual, but mechanical and dreamlike. While the water boiled, she sat at the head of the table, at an angle to him, her forehead leaning against her hands. She closed her eyes and her breathing became regular, as though she were asleep.

I’m sorry about my father, he said.

Her eyelids fluttered. You’re not responsible for him, she said.

He put a hand on her arm and leaned forward. I’m sorry for myself then, he said. That I didn’t help more.

She shook her head without removing her hands from her forehead or his from her arm. He was apologizing for the wrong thing, she thought. He didn’t understand the depth of his insult in the barn. She was too exhausted to explain it to him and too upset to forgive him yet. She sensed the water boiling. After pouring it into the teapot, she located the burlap sack in the bedroom.

The money, she said as she sat down and placed it on the table between them.

He heard pride in her voice, the same pride that had repelled him the night before. I should have stayed with you but did not, he said. I apologized. Will you forgive me?

She opened the top of the teapot and, closing her eyelids, let the steam caress her aching eyes. Cuttings from the rose bush are in there, she said. Da would like you to plant them outside the new place.
He pulled the bag across the table. What would you like me to do? he asked.

Plant it, if you find a good spot. She replaced the lid and poured him a cup.

He opened the bag and looked inside. A roll of bills. Cuttings in a bag tied with twine. That was not at all what he meant. She didn’t understand the depth of his stubbornness, he thought. He closed the bag and stood up.

Your tea, she said.

I won’t apologize again, he said.

He stepped around the corner of the table as though to embrace or kiss her. She pushed him away.

He was gone. She went to the bedroom window and looked at her reflection while re-braiding her hair. Her hands felt heavy. She paused as his horse galloped down the main road. The saddle bags bounced against the horse’s flanks. A light rain had fallen earlier in the morning, leaving the red road and high grass damp. She thought of the place up north where they would all go, a place similar to here, but where, John had said, the sun rose instead of set over the sea. He didn’t look back. When he was out of sight, she rolled her braids into a bun and deftly pinned them against the back of her head. She leaned forward until her forehead almost touched the window and smoothed her hair. She looked at her dark eyes and through her reflection at the vacant red road and cloudy sky.
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