Tragical Romance and All

by ElderofAvonlea

Summary

Now older and not much wiser, Anne has come to regard Gilbert as one of her dear friends. But, when he leaves Avonlea (and Anne) behind to attend college, Anne finds herself more affected by his absence than she cares to admit. How will she react when he returns, a big question on his mind?

TL;DR: this is the tragical romance (emphasis on tragical) you have been longing for feat. the babysitting scene we all deserve

Notes

Thank you for reading! This is my first time sharing my writing, so I am quite excited to hear what you all think of it. I love the depth of all these characters and am excited to explore what else is in store for them. Stay tuned for frequent updates!
Inviting sunlight splattered through the trees as the two girls walked, arm in arm, towards the schoolhouse. The blooms of March had long since fell from the branches, leaving thick layers of emerald leaves in their wake, shimmering in the late spring air.

The two friends chattered together as they traversed the familiar path through the woods. Diana excitedly divulged to her redheaded companion that she had overheard her mother the evening prior informing her father of the arrival of an older couple in town who, as Mrs. Rachel Lynde had been quick to discover, had a son close in age to the girls themselves. They giggled together as they supposed on his countenance and demeanor, imagining him to perhaps be a stout toad of a boy, or perhaps more exciting still, the princely counterpart.

Reaching the end of their journey, the two stumbled into the schoolhouse, fingers pressed to their lips in futile attempts to quench their sputtering giggles. Their fingers trembled with humor as they hung up their hats and stowed their lunch baskets. Sliding into their adjacent seats in the back of the classroom, Anne sucked in a few breaths to settle herself. Beside her, Diana wiped at the corners of her eyes, smiling broadly at her exuberant friend.

The two whispered between themselves as the other students arrived, pairs and trios of them taking their seats and striking up conversation. It was only when Ms. Stacey had begun her lecture on the weather systems of the Great Lakes region that Anne noted the empty seat in front of her.

*Where was Gilbert?* Anne had always known the boy to be exceedingly punctual. It was not like him to be late. She was suddenly stricken with the thought that something very bad must’ve occurred to keep him from school.

No sooner had Anne begun to fret when the schoolhouse door squealed open, revealing a harried Gilbert Blythe. He slipped into the room, gently closing the door with his fingertips and wincing as it clicked loudly behind him. Ms. Stacey paused in her lecture as every student turned to look at the late arrival.

“Gilbert, welcome to class,” Ms. Stacey said with tight eyes, disapproval dripping from her visage. “Please take a seat.”

The boy nodded in compliance, sliding into the empty seat in front of Anne. As he pulled his books from his knapsack, he glanced back, shooting her an exasperated look trailed closely by a crooked smile. Anne stifled a laugh.

The sun was high above the treetops by the time the lunch hour arrived. Not wanting to spend another moment indoors on a day as beautiful as this, Anne exited the schoolhouse with her lunch basket bumping against her thigh. Soon she had settled cross-legged on a large, flat boulder behind the schoolhouse. She leaned pack on her palms into the sunlight, soaking in the warmth of the sun on her pale skin.

The distinct crunch of approaching footsteps caused her to lean forward. She squinted as she watched the boy settle beside her, gracefully organizing his long legs on the stone. Curiosity nagged at her.

“So, what kept you this morning?” she asked, rummaging in her basket for the ham and cheese sandwich Marilla had prepared.
“I was waiting for the post to arrive before I left. Edmund was running a bit behind schedule today,” he said in the way of an answer.

Anne nodded in understanding. Gilbert had sent in an application to Redmond College back when snow had still coated the ground. As many as four or five months had passed since that time, and Anne could tell that he was beginning to worry an answer would never arrive.

“Don’t worry,” she said reassuringly. “I’m sure a letter bearing wonderful news will come any day now, and when it does, you must promise to tell me at once!” The corners of her eyes crinkled as she smiled at him.

“As you wish,” the boy acquiesced, taking a bite from the apple in his hand. Juice dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He blushed, glancing away from Anne as he wiped the liquid away with his sleeve.

Anne was helping Marilla clear away the breakfast table the next morning when an insistent knock fell upon the door of Green Gables. Anne froze at the sound, bent over the sink, hands slick with soap. She glanced questioningly at Marilla, whose eyes looked back at her with the same confusion. Setting down the kettle in her hands, Marilla made to open the door.

“Good morning, Miss Cuthbert. Is Anne still here?” A saucer slipped from between her fingers as she heard Gilbert’s voice filter in from the foyer. Cursing herself, she shook the suds from her hands as Marilla bade the boy inside.

“Gilbert, what on earth-” she began as he stepped into the kitchen.

“It’s come, Anne! I’ve been accepted!” he cried, proudly holding a letter out towards her. The relief and pride apparent on his features mirrored the emotion that surged through Anne as she realized his meaning.

“Oh, Gilbert!” she exclaimed, launching herself towards him. “This is such splendid news!” She threw her arms around him. Too overjoyed to falter at her sudden touch, Gilbert ensnared her waist and lifted her from the floorboards. The breath of her laugh brushed against his neck and he held her closer.

Marilla, taken quite aback at the indecorous display before her, cleared her throat loudly. The sound brought the intertwined pair to their senses, and Gilbert lowered Anne to her feet, stepping swiftly away from her. Though the stern woman’s glare was fixed on her daughter, the hairs on the back of Gilbert’s neck rose all the same. The fabric around his neck, damp from where Anne’s water-laden hands had been, chilled against his skin.

“Congratulations, Gilbert,” the woman said, turning to him. Pride glimmered in the corners of her eyes as she looked at him. “You’d better wait outside while Anne cleans up for school.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Gilbert bowed his head to her slightly, then slipped out the door through which he had come.

Marilla’s steely gaze fell back to Anne, who was dragging her hands over the front of her apron. Anne looked at her defiantly, ready to challenge whatever insinuation was about to erupt from the woman’s lips. Marilla, clearly thinking better of starting a quarrel so soon in the day, merely directed, “Go on and change your dress. You don’t want to keep Gilbert waiting.”
Anne’s shoulders relaxed, relief spreading over her. She turned toward the stairs.
Exchanging Goodbyes

The summer months had slipped by quietly, making way for crisper breezes and golden leaves to adorn the trees. Having naught else to do as school was not in session, Anne busied herself with household chores and imaginings on what adventures she might have gotten up to in her younger years.

She had turned seventeen during the hottest part of the season, and Marilla had deigned to take her and Diana into Charlottetown to window shop and gorge themselves on afternoon tea in a teahouse off of Main Street. It had been a splendid occasion, and Anne thought of it fondly often whilst she went about with her chores.

As it had turned out, the fabled new boy whom the two friends had snickered over the previous season was no toad at all, and Diana had taken a liking to him straight away. The sandy-haired boy had, as any boy of his age would be sure to do given her bosom friend’s incomparable beauty, engaged her interest immediately. It wasn’t long before all of Avonlea was made aware of their besotted hearts. Even now the town waited with bated breath for the announcement of their engagement, sure to come any day now. As a consequence, Anne saw increasingly less of her friend as the months passed, and though at first saddened by the prospect of sharing her dearest Diana with another, she could not help but be happy for the joy that Fred brought to her friend’s face.

With Anne most often about the house for the summer, Marilla had begun to survey her blossoming daughter with increasing frequency. Late one afternoon, she was particularly struck as she observed Anne pulling bedsheets from the clothesline, the setting sun glancing off her jaw which had traded its youthful curve for the sharp lines of a woman. When Anne had come inside with the clean laundry, Marilla had beckoned her to her own room, where she rummaged through a chest, finally presenting Anne with a slight, eggshell-colored corset.

“I think it’s time that you ought to start wearing such things,” Marilla had said in response to her daughter’s blank expression upon seeing the garment. “You are quickly becoming a woman, and I fear I am already tardy in asking you to present yourself accordingly only now.”

“Ms. Stacey doesn’t wear a corset,” Anne had argued, “and she is many years older than me!”

“I don’t see why it should concern you what your teacher choses to or not to wear,” Marilla had retorted, placing the fabric in Anne’s hands. “This was mine, back when I was about your age. We shall see how it fits you and go into town day after tomorrow to get you properly fitted if need be.”

Seeing that Marilla was staunch in her position, Anne had begrudgingly acquiesced to trying it on. With Marilla’s help lacing the back, the both of them were pleased to find that it fit quite well. Anne had stood in front of her mirror, turning and admiring the way it brought definition to her curves. Catching the older woman’s eye in the glass, Anne had muttered sheepishly, “I quite like it after all.”

Satisfaction settled in Marilla’s features as she uncrossed her arms and stood from her seat on the edge of Anne’s bed.

“Perhaps you would like to try wearing your hair up for a change as well,” she ventured, moving to gather Anne’s fiery locks in her fingers without waiting for a response.

Anne swallowed and watched as Marilla’s deft hands collected her hair, organizing it delicately at the back of her head. Small wisps fell free, framing her face, and Anne sighed dreamily. How grown up she looked. Her eyes sparkled as she examined the design when Marilla had finished, and she eagerly asked Marilla to teach her to do it herself at once.
“Of course, child,” the woman had complied, smiling fondly at the young woman in the mirror.

All this led presently to poor Gilbert’s confusion as he approached Green Gables early one morning in the budding autumn. Golden leaves swirled about him as he walked down the familiar path. He greeted it as if an old friend, for it had been many months since he had been by the farmstead.

The verdant gables of the house coming into view, he thought fondly of the afternoons he and Anne had passed here together. Always poised to assert her abilities over his own, she had jumped at his offer to allow her to help him prepare for his entrance exams the previous fall. As such, they had whittled away the hours together over a heap of novels and anthologies, Anne passionately conveying the depth of the literature and the expansiveness of the history hidden beneath their worn covers.

Though Anne had always suspected an ulterior motive behind his generous deference to her abilities, she never would have supposed that Gilbert simply relished the opportunity to be in her company. Seeing her eyes alit with a passionate fire as she explained the circumstances of some ancient war or tragical romance had been all the compensation he needed to endure her arrogant clips at his relative ignorance.

With the thought of Anne, he reached inside his trousers pocket to finger the small band that lay hidden inside. Acceptance letter in hand, he had ventured into his late father’s room some months ago to search for the ring, finding it in a small drawer of his father’s desk, nestled among some other trinkets of his mother’s that his father had held onto. He had slipped it into his pocket then, carrying it about each day since, afraid to miss an opportune moment on account of having left it concealed somewhere at home. Over the ensuing months, the presence of it in his pocket had brought him a peace and a hopefulness like no other. Now, as his footsteps fell upon the path, he rubbed the familiar band with his index, sending a prickling sensation through his body that did nothing to lift the sorrow settling in his veins.

His heart was heavy as he rounded the bend, the full expanse of the lawn now well within his view. His brows buckled in confusion as he caught sight of a young woman reaching up to pin a frock to the clothes line. Even from a distance, he could discern the slightness of her figure and the elegance of her fingers as she bent to select another cloth from the basket at her feet. Her hair was pinned back delicately, accentuating the length of her neck and the sharpness of her jaw. If it had not been for the fiery color of her hair, Gilbert was sure he would not have recognized her for who she was.

“Anne!” he called out, approaching her. He pulled the cap from his head, running his fingers through his curls nervously. Now that she stood before him, only feet away, he could not ignore the hammering of his heart.

“Gilbert,” she replied, a fluster in her voice. She stepped away from the laundry and moved toward him. “What brings you by?” she asked, gaining back the evenness in her tone.

“I- I’ve come to say, to say goodbye,” he stammered, the weight of his heart choking him on his words.

Her brows knit together. “Whatever do you mean? Where are you going?” she asked, concern tightened her words.

“To Kingsport. My train leaves within the hour,” he said. The bluntness of his words hung in the air between them as Anne realized his meaning. A shadow passed over her features, and the pit in Gilbert’s stomach grew ever deeper. Somewhere in his heart, he longed for her to ask him to stay, but knew that she would not.
“When will you be back?” Her voice was almost a whisper, and he had to step towards her to make out her words in the breeze that surrounded them.

“Not until Christmas,” he said. He watched as she digested this, chewing lightly on her bottom lip. His stomach turned.

Gilbert’s imminent departure pulled at Anne’s chest in a way that she could not comprehend in the moment. He gazed down at her, true sadness etched into his features. His deep brown eyes searched her face. Unwilling to let him see the quiver in her lip, Anne bit down on it harder as she chose her words carefully.

Though she had hardly seen him in the past few months, she realized that the comfort of having him nearby had carried her considerably through the lonely season. Memories of his furrowed brow as he flipped through the pages of a book and the crook of his smile shuttled through Anne’s mind. With a start, she realized that she did not want him to go.

“Well, don’t miss your train on my account,” she said into the silence that had begun to stretch between them. She feigned a smile as she stepped toward him, reaching up to hug him lightly. The breeze whisked away the next words on her lips as he wrapped himself around her, his long fingers pressing into the boning of her corset. Tears sprung to her eyes.

Many moments passed as they held each other, until finally Anne pulled away, wiping her eyes with her fingers. “I have been so thankful for your friendship these past months,” she breathed, looking into his eyes earnestly. “Do take care of yourself, Gilbert. Oh, and don’t forget to write!” She smiled at him, squandering the rising cry in her chest.

Gilbert’s face faltered at her words, but he quickly recovered, offering her a small smile. “Of course,” he said. His eyes lingered on her face. “Goodbye, Anne.”

Before Anne could respond, he had already turned away, descending down the path to the main road where a train would take him far off to a land unknown to her, leaving her alone. Again. She pressed her shaking palm to her stomach as the tears began to roll freely down her cheeks.

“Goodbye, Gilbert.”
Dear Anne,

As you have no doubt already deduced from the postage, this letter comes to you from the distant halls of Redmond College. I have settled in just fine. Kingsport is a quaint little town, having little more in the way of novel excitement than Charlottetown, save for the extensive collection in the college library. I spend most of my time there, reading and studying, though I fear the stories I indulge myself in aren’t half as delightful as those of your imaginings.

I expect that your classes have resumed. I do hope that they are not too dull without my steadfast competition. In truth, I have yet to meet a student here at Redmond with a wit and intelligence to match your own. Admittedly, school has been rather dull as a result.

I hope all is well in Avonlea. Though it has only been a fortnight, I find myself sick for home and the company of your voice. Please give my best regards to your family and do let me know how Bash and Mary are getting on without me.

Yours,
Gilbert

---

Dear Anne,

Though I haven’t heard from you since the postage of my last letter, I couldn’t help but write again. I have been in correspondence with Dr. Ward, the physician in Charlottetown, confirming the details of my apprenticeship with him there. If you recall, I spent a collection of afternoons in his office last year, but never for any great length of time. I’ve only just found out that, come summer, I am to shadow him through everything from regular visits to surgeries! I can hardly contain my excitement at the prospect of it! Book learning has been satisfying to a point, but nothing I could read on a page will compare to obtaining real hands-on experience, of that I am sure and certain.

I trust your studies with Miss Stacey are progressing well. All of the time you dedicated to helping me prepare for my exams is sure to aid you when the time comes for yours. You ought to have no difficulty at all! Of course, if you concede to needing a remedial lesson on geometry, I am only a day’s train ride away.

I jest, but I do sorely miss your companionship. The blokes in my classes are kind enough, but few have even a spark of passion within them, and for that I pity them. I cannot imagine devoting my life to anything that didn’t make me feel as though a fire was lit inside me.

I am looking forward to the receipt of your reply to my first letter, which I imagine will arrive shortly. In the meantime, do take care of yourself, Anne.

Yours,
Gilbert

---

Dear Anne,

I imagine that you are quite busied with your studies, and it has kept you from having the time to
write. If you could spare a moment to send along a few words indicating that you are in good health, it would do much to quell my worried mind.

Give my regards to Mr. and Miss Cuthbert.

Yours,

Gilbert
Soon after Gilbert departed, lessons began again and though Anne still preferred to while away the autumn days with a slate and a book in her hands, she could scarce ignore the twinge in her chest each time her gaze fell upon the empty seat before her. Diana, thankfully, had returned to school with Anne, having not become engaged to Fred so quickly as supposed. Anne was grateful for the return of her company, but her chatter always seemed to circle back to Fred and his innumerous good qualities. Having no beau of her own, nor even one to pine after, left Anne feeling quite useless in conversation with her bosom friend.

“He has written to you, hasn’t he?” Diana’s question drifted on the periphery of Anne’s attention. Her mind was occupied mulling over the relative sweetness of green and red apples. Though the green ones had always seemed to Anne to be rather tart, just last week Marilla had made the most splendid pie with the green fruits Mary had brought over from the orchard.

“Anne?”

Diana’s shake of her shoulder snapped Anne from her musings. “Sorry?”

“Gilbert,” she repeated. “He has written to you, hasn’t he? Ruby is asking after him.” Anne looked up to meet the infatuated eyes of her blonde friend. Heat rose in Anne’s cheeks at the mention of his name in association with Ruby’s. Lately her romantic friend’s captivation with Gilbert had begun to chip away at Anne’s patience.

“Indeed, he has,” she confirmed, swallowing the lump in her throat.

“Well? What does he say? How is he? Has he said anything about me?” As Ruby peppered Anne with questions, the redhead’s annoyance rose.

“He’s fine,” she replied curtly, terminating the conversation. It brought her little consolation to see Ruby’s face pinch into a frown as Anne neglected to answer her last question.

Diana, sensing Anne’s discomfort, turned the conversation back to her most recent romantic encounter with a certain charming boy. Anne felt free to tune her out and returned comfortably to her musings on the sweetness of fruit.

After the school day had ended, Anne walked the wooded path back to Green Gables kept in good company by the many thoughts circulating in her head. Reflecting on the conversation at lunch, Anne wondered if perhaps she had been too harsh with Ruby, but as she thought of the mooning nature of the girl’s gaze, she was immediately remedied of any guilt she had towards her. She was careful not to fall into consideration of the topic of their conversation, for thoughts of him had eaten away at her far too much already, and she had resolved firmly to put Gilbert from her mind entirely. The alternative was too painful.

The sun had hardly moved in the sky when she arrived back at Green Gables. Anne ducked inside the house to put her books down and kiss Matthew hello and goodbye before plucking a spare basket from the stoop and sauntering out the door. Stopping by the coop, she collected a handful of eggs in the basket nestled in the crook of her arm.

Once satisfied, Anne closed the latch on the coop gently and started off down the lane. Despite her pledge to avoid thoughts of, well, him, Anne could not bear the thought of Mary and Bash being neglected. As such, she had made an effort to visit them every few days to check in on how they
were getting on. Though the other residents of Avonlea had come to tolerate their residence in town, none made any attempts at neighborly hospitality. With him gone, the path leading up to the stone cottage’s door was hardly worn for travel.

Anne rapped her knuckles lightly against the door, a smile spreading across her face as Mary held the door open for her to step through. The kind woman had come to expect and welcome Anne’s frequent visits, for she too was starved for friendship in the small town.

Anne softly placed the basket of eggs down on the kitchen table as Mary turned to prepare tea.

“How are you feeling?” Anne asked, gesturing to the bump thinly guised by the folds of the woman’s skirt.

“Oh, just fine, dear,” Mary answered sweetly, placing a saucer and cup down in front of Anne. “Though,” she said, dropping her volume slightly, “I felt a kick just this morning!” Anne’s eyes widened, and the two giggled with excitement.

“I do hope you’ve told Gilbert,” Mary continued, shaking a spoonful of sugar into her cup. “Else he’ll have a real fright when he comes home come Christmas to find me fat as a pig!” She chuckled and stirred her tea. When Anne didn’t respond, she looked up into the younger’s face to find it had closed to her. Anne peered dolefully into her cup.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Mary asked, concern threaded through her words.

“I haven’t,” Anne whispered. “Written to him, I mean.”

Instead of inquiring as to why not exactly, Mary reached across the table wordlessly and folded her guest’s pale hand in her own.

Anne continued of her own accord. “He’s written to me a handful of times now, and I so desperately want to reply, but when I sit down to write, the proper words don’t come. When he left, I was caught so unawares by the affliction the loss of his friendship gave me that I daren’t write to him at all. And now, I have yet to return a letter! He must think me so unkind as to never forgive me!”

Mary squeezed her hand reassuringly. “Now if there’s one thing I know to be true, it’s that it will take much more than some unreturned letters for him to turn from you.”

Anne smiled gratefully at the woman. Mary’s kind eyes crinkled at the corners as she looked across the table into her guest’s wavering gaze.

As thoughts of the curly-haired boy lingered in the air between the two women, Anne considered Mary’s words. The least she could do was let Gilbert know that all was well in Avonlea, as he had asked. She owed him as much for her months of unwarranted silence. Mind resolved, Anne lifted her gaze back to Mary, who rubbed her calloused thumb over Anne’s knuckles. She gave the young woman a small nod of encouragement.

“You’d better run along now, dear,” Mary said, pulling Anne to her feet. “It seems to me that you have a letter to write.”

Breathless from her run back to Green Gables, Anne slammed the door to her bedroom behind her as she rushed towards the small writing desk tucked in the corner. On her short journey back from Mary’s, she had thought of a litany of things she wanted to tell Gilbert, and now she could hardly
wait to put ink to parchment.

Eagerly, she pulled on the drawer, which stubbornly jammed in turn. She huffed as she peeled the half-written letters from inside, discarding them on the floor beside her. The drawer coming free in her hands, she slid a fresh sheet of parchment from it and poised the quill in her hand.

Her chest still heaved within the confines of her corset. She took a few breaths to steady herself and her trembling hand before dipping the nib into the pot of ink resting on the desk.

Dear Gilbert,

I’m so sorry for not writing to you sooner. I have been quite busy, as you can likely imagine, and have not had time to return your correspondence.

Anne bit her lip and shook her head. She balled the page between her hands, thinking that she oughtn’t fib so plainly, as he would surely see through her words. She pulled a fresh sheet from the drawer and began again.

Dear Gilbert,

I hope your studies are going well. Everything is fine here at Green Gables and I have often stopped by your home to inquire after your family. You’ll be happy to hear that Mary is with child! I do hope you sleep heavily as there are sure to be many sleepless summer nights when you return otherwise.

Disturbed by her presumption of Gilbert’s sleeping habits, she discarded the page again.

Dear Gilbert,

I am no good at writing letters. To put it plainly, I have missed you quite a terrible amoun-

Dear Gilbert,

Mary is sure that you shall not hold my lack of correspondence against me. I hope she is right.

My dear Gilbert,

Dear Gil-

Anne huffed, discarded letters scattered at her feet. She rubbed her temple as one thought revolved around in her consciousness.

Dear Gilbert,

Please come home.

Love,
Anne
Jerry tugged his cap lower over his ears as he made his way to the barn. The chill of winter was beginning to settle in Avonlea, tinging the tips of his ears a bright scarlet. He huffed, pulling the thick fabric of his coat tighter to his body, the white cloud of his breath hanging still in the air.

Gingerly, he slid back the door of the barn, his bare fingers burning against the frozen iron handle. Stepping inside, the wooden paneling of the barn shivered as he closed the door behind him, forbidding the cold from rushing in. Jerry blew on his hands, rubbing them together to stir what little warmth remained therein. A tingle bloomed in his fingertips as the color returned to them.

Once the feeling had returned to his palms completely, Jerry hoisted a pitchfork from where it hung on the worn wall of the barn. He scaled the rungs to the hayloft, pitchfork in hand, with an ease and grace indicative of the many seasons he had passed at Green Gables. Now a young man of eighteen, Jerry had grown considerably since first stepping foot in the barn all those years ago. He had kept his hair long, having no mind to cut it as frequently as his mother thought he ought. When it wasn’t kept contained by a cap, it hung limply around his face, obscuring the sharp set of his jaw and the firmness that had settled in his brow.

His feet landing lightly on the floorboards of the loft, Jerry brushed a free lock of his dark hair back under his cap as his eyes locked with those of the young woman settled comfortably into the hay pile he had intended to move.

“Good morning, Anne,” he said in greeting, abandoning the pitchfork against a wooden pillar.

“Hello, Jerry,” she returned, sighing and looking up from the book in her lap.

“What are you reading?” he asked, gesturing at the open pages and settling down beside her in the soft hay. After marking her place with a stray sprig, she closed the book and turned the cover towards him. “Pride… and… Pre-joo-” He struggled to make sense of the last word in the title.

“Pride and Prejudice,” Anne confirmed. “It’s the most romantical story about this woman, Elizabeth Bennet, who presumes judgment so quickly upon others that she misses what is right before her, a most eligible bachelor who loves her so. Even better, she has ever so many adventures with her dear sisters. What’s it like having sisters, Jerry?” She gazed at the young man beside her, her eyes wide with wonder.

“Well, sometimes we bicker about senseless things, and I like to tease them often, but at the end of the day we all want the best for one another.” He paused, considering the redhead beside him. “In truth, there are days when you seem more to me a sister than any of them on account of how much time I spend here at Green Gables.” Jerry blushed at the smile spreading across Anne’s face.

“Indeed, with you around I have never found myself wanting for fraternal affection,” she said, setting the book in her hands down by her feet.

“Seems to me that’s not the only thing you have in common with Miss Bennet.” Jerry’s eyes glimmered as he circled back to the jest that had been immediate on his tongue as soon as Anne had begun describing the novel in her hands. Anne narrowed her eyes at him.

“I’m certain I have no idea to what you are referring,” she insisted, the deep crimson flush in her pale cheeks giving her away.

Jerry chuckled as he rose to his feet. “You mean to tell me that you aren’t overlooking a certain
‘eligible bachelor’…” He trailed off as Anne’s face soured at his insinuation. Still smiling, he extended his hand to her, helping her up from the hay pile.

As she brushed off her skirts, Anne replied sardonically, “It seems you have an imagination after all, Jerry.” He stumbled back from her in mock surprise, clutching a hand over his heart, a wounded look in his eyes. Anne scowled at him, then bent to collect her book from the floorboards.

Abandoning the hurt act, Jerry reached for the pitchfork once more, his words taking on a more serious tone. “Really though, Anne. Why can’t you give the poor man a chance? It’s clear he’s soft for you.”

Anne huffed, straightening and wiping straw from the cover of the book. She was surprised to find that she wanted to be truthful with the farmhand who was like a brother to her. Despite his teasing, she knew that Jerry would respect her sentiments, whatever they may be. And perhaps if she did tell him the truth, it would bring a swift end to his poking fun at her over the curly-haired boy.

“He is a dear friend,” she began slowly, watching as Jerry turned a forkful of hay over. “But I do not care for him in that way.” Jerry arched a skeptical brow at her, spurring Anne to continue.

“I imagine what it must be like to be in love. I am sure that I will know right from the first moment our eyes meet. We shall be made for each other, true kindred spirits, and nothing could ever come in between.” She gazed dreamily at the grey sky peeking through the small window near the roof of the barn, the novel clutched against her breast.

The harsh scratch of the pitchfork against the floorboards startled her back to her surroundings, and she met the farmhand’s eyes. Jerry leant against the shaft of the pitchfork, his eyes soft.

Anne swallowed, dropping her gaze to the straw about her feet. Toeing it away with the edge of her boot, she confessed, “It isn’t like that with him, and I don’t imagine it ever could be.”

A few moments of silence passed as Jerry took in her words, feeling the weight of her admission in his chest. He sensed that she had never spoken these feelings aloud to anyone else, and he did not take lightly the trust she had just put in him. As she looked up to meet his eyes, he nodded at her, his gaze unwavering from her face.

Anne smiled thinly. “Well, I best be going. Marilla will wonder what’s become of me,” she said, moving to lower herself down the ladder to the packed earth of the barn floor. Jerry bid her farewell from the loft as she slipped out the barn door into the chilly morning.

Setting off towards the house, Anne’s shoulders tightened as she realized that Gilbert’s name had not been spoken once over the course of the entire exchange.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'Twas the Night Before Christmas

The frosty air bit at Anne’s nose as she trudged up the walk to the stone cottage. A soft orange light glowed from the window panes, the promise of warmth beckoning her towards the house. It was the eve before Christmas and Anne had labored the day away in the kitchen over the loaf of sweetbread now tucked in a basket under her arm.

Reaching the door, she knocked quickly, then brought her hands before her lips to blow on them. She shivered as twilight fell.

Bash chuckled as he opened the door, his gaze running over her fiery hair. “Well speak of the devil,” he called into the room behind him. He opened the door wider to reveal a roaring hearth with his wife reclining happily on the sofa before it. Anne stepped into the house eagerly, rubbing her hands together. Depositing the basket on the kitchen table, as had become customary, she moved to kiss Mary lightly on the cheek before taking the seat beside her.

No sooner had Anne opened her mouth to inquire after her health when a curly-haired man appeared from the adjoining hall. “Who was that at the-” His eyes fell on the copper-haired woman. “Anne,” he breathed, drinking the sight of her in.

Before he had time to think better of it, Anne was across the room and in his arms. She buried her nose, still numb from her walk over, into his chest, breathing in the familiar smell of parchment and apples. Gilbert cradled her against him, the calloused fingers of his right hand burying themselves in her hair. His lips rested on the top of her head, her hair shimmering in the firelight.

Bash’s booming voice broke them apart. “It’s a right good thing you’re here, Anne. Blythe here almost jabbered my ear clean off asking after you. There hasn’t been one moment of peace since he arrived!”

The tips of Gilbert’s ears burned with a deep flush. “Don’t pay him any mind,” he muttered to Anne, who had let go of him by now, a bit unsettled by the whole exchange. She looked to Mary for reassurance, but the woman’s eyes sparkled with a humor Anne did not understand.

Gilbert touched her waist gently, sidling past her into the room. Her breath caught at his light touch, and she leaned against the wall behind her for support. She watched him, breathless, as he moved about the kitchen, finding a platter and knife for the loaf she had brought. He was taller than she remembered, his shoulders broader as well. The shadow of stubble along his square jaw was brought to high relief in the firelight. His very presence radiated through the room, and perhaps the whole house. Anne marveled at how she hadn’t sensed him before coming inside.

Anne sucked a few breaths between her teeth as she steadied her trembling fingers against the bodice of her dress. She was excited to see him, of course, his having been away so long, but nothing could have prepared her for the affect he seemed to be having on her now. It was almost as if another person had returned from Kingsport in his stead, so unfamiliar was her present feeling around him.

Gilbert felt Anne’s sapphire eyes on him as he arranged the slices of bread on the silver platter. He shivered under her gaze. Doing his best to ignore the burn in his chest, he carried the dessert over to Mary, who patted his hand as she selected a slice. Bash and Anne both shook their heads as he raised the tray towards them, so he returned the platter to the kitchen.
As the light timbre of the silver stilling against the wooden tabletop dissipated, an uncomfortable silence settled over the room. Anne retained her place against the far wall, willing herself to look anywhere but at the pair of dark eyes watching her from across the room. Bash and Mary’s eyes flitted between the pair, finally landing on one another. Finding his own humor reflected in his wife’s eyes, a snicker rose in Bash’s throat.

“Darling, won’t you be a bit more comfortable in bed?” Bash said, abruptly shattering the silence and turning to his wife who had only just begun to nibble on her slice of bread. Her forehead scrunched momentarily before something in her husband’s face convinced her to take her leave.

“Oh, yes, indeed I think I would be,” she said quickly, taking Bash’s outstretched hand and pushing herself from the sofa. Gilbert stepped forward to be of assistance, but she waved him off. “It was lovely to see you Anne,” she said, squeezing Anne’s hand as she and Bash passed her out of the room.

When they had disappeared behind one of the doors down the hall, silence fell over the firelit room once more. Gilbert felt certain that, if he had been standing any closer, Anne would be able to hear plainly the thumping in his chest. He gazed at her, eyes running over her body. She was even more stunning than he remembered, her hair glimmering around wide cerulean eyes. She glowed in the firelight, almost ethereal. He set his jaw against the tightness emerging in his trousers.

“I’m sorry I didn’t write,” Anne said finally, trying to break some of the tension in the room.

“That’s alright,” he replied. In truth, he had spent the past months fretting over her silence, but he wouldn’t bring that up now. They both fell silent, renewing the tension that made the air almost too thick for Anne to swallow.

Anne searched the ground for some inspiration as to what to say next. Sensing her discomfort, Gilbert spoke up, “I got you something.” He moved towards her, and for a brief moment she feared that he would do something their friendship could not recover from. Instead he moved past her, disappearing momentarily into the darkened hallway. Anne gulped in breaths as the thickness in the air followed him out of the room.

He returned with three volumes tied together with twine and offered them to her. Her hands trembled as she took the books from him, her heartbeat faltering in her chest. Anne ran a delicate finger over the threadbare corners of the texts, at once sensing how treasured they had been over the years. She turned them in her hands to study the bindings as Gilbert spoke.

“They’re, uh, poetry collections that I picked up on campus,” he said, somewhat lamely. He raised an arm to grip the back of his neck. “I thought you might read them and, uh, tell me about them.”

The odd tension from before dissipated from Anne’s body. This was the Gilbert she knew. She smiled up at him, thanking him profusely for the pages in her hands. He grinned sheepishly, his body relaxing at her positive receipt of his gift. He inched closer to her.

“It’s getting late, I’d better go,” Anne said suddenly, noticing the darkness against the windows.

“I’ll walk you,” he offered, reaching easily for his coat by the door and shrugging it on in one fluid motion before she had a chance to turn him down.

Anne clung to his arm as they shuffled through the snow in the direction of Green Gables. They spoke quietly between them as they went, much as they had used to do. The band in Gilbert’s pocket turned over and over in his free hand, as Anne’s fingers gripped his elbow tightly. The brevity of the journey surprised them both as they came upon the front gate, and soon, the front door.
They lingered in the moonlight, neither wanting to part with the other’s company. Smiles shifted between them as they glanced to and away from the heavy front door. Finally, a long shiver ran through Anne’s slight frame. She hugged herself closer as she spoke.

“Thank you for walking me home.” She paused as he nodded. “It was really good to see you.”

“You as well,” he replied, the slant of the moonlight obscuring the tenderness in his gaze as he peered down at her. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, dropping her gaze to the snow crusting the tips of her boots. She shivered again, rocking back and forth and hugging her elbows.

“Well, goodnight, Gil.” She reached out, brushing the tips of her fingers against his elbow. “Merry Christmas.” Her warm breath drifted over him. He lifted his hand to skim his knuckles over her cheek, making her breath catch.

“Merry Christmas, Anne,” he whispered.

She turned away from him and entered the house before the odd feeling in her stomach could threaten to overtake her.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I am learning a lot as I go, so bear with me! I have the next few chapters drafted, so I hope to update again soon. Thank you to those of you leaving kudos and words of encouragement, they really help me to want to continue with this story!
Anne’s eyelids fluttered open the following morning, a sweet smell wafting into her gabled room from the kitchen below. Saliva flooded her mouth as she sat up in bed, wiping the sleep from her puffy eyes. She blinked, bright sunlight escaping through the part between the heavy curtains over her window.

“Anne!” Marilla’s call was muffled as it ascended the staircase and slipped under the bedroom door. Disentangling her limbs from the bedsheets, Anne swung her legs around to rest her bare feet on the chilly hardwood.

“Coming, Marilla!” she called back, lifting herself from the mattress, her fingers pushing off of a nearby bedpost. She padded to her dresser and peered at the reflection in the mirror hanging above it.

Deep violet pockets hung beneath her eyes, stark against the porcelain of her skin. Anne gently rubbed her fingertips over them, but the purple seemed only to boast a more brilliant color when she took her hands away.

Sighing, she quickly pulled a comb through her hair, her deft fingers twisting the red threads into a loose knot behind her head. Once pinned, she bent to pull a frock from the dresser drawer.

In a matter of minutes, she was presentable enough to go downstairs and attend to whatever delectable treat Marilla had evidently already set on the stove. Anne followed her nose into the kitchen to find the older woman hovering over an open frying pan, gingerly coaxing a thin layer of batter to flip over.

“Pancakes, Marilla? You’ve outdone yourself!” Anne chirped, planting a peck on the woman’s cheek.

“Merry Christmas, Anne,” Marilla replied warmly. She gestured for Anne to take over the attention of the pan in front of her. As Anne moved to take the wooden spatula from her hand, Marilla caught sight of her daughter’s face.

“Good heavens, Anne! You look as if you didn’t sleep a wink last night. Are you feeling alright?” Marilla’s brow furrowed in concern as she tilted Anne’s pale chin up towards her.

“I’m fine, Marilla,” Anne insisted, waving the woman off and drawing her chin back. “Just excited for the holiday.” She smiled weakly, moving once again to take the spatula from Marilla’s hand.

Unsatisfied with this explanation but willing to abandon the subject, Marilla made way for the redhead girl in front of the stove.

As she fell into the rhythm of pouring batter and flipping cakes, Anne’s mind drifted back to the caress of Gilbert’s hand against her cheek the night before. His touch had sent a jolt, not unlike the electricity Ms. Stacey had so often described in class, through her body. She had hardly slept that night with the ghost of his touch on her skin, her mind spinning.

She had been delirious with happiness at the sight of him appearing in the hallway last night, the joy of being reacquainted with an estranged friend having overtaken her completely and quite by surprise. Despite the evident tension between them, their easy conversation on the journey back to Green Gables had convinced Anne that hope of recovering their former friendship was not entirely lost. That is, until he had touched her cheek and made her heart stutter.
The only rival to the attention of her thoughts on Gilbert’s newfound effect on her person was that of her acute guilt in having repeatedly failed to be a decent friend to him. She was sure that the unease she had begun to feel in his presence was born in part from their uneven score in that regard. He had written her repeatedly, and her silence had no doubt hurt him more deeply than he had let on. Nevertheless, he had gotten her a thoughtful and heartfelt gift for Christmas whilst she had neglected to think of getting him anything at all. Now it was certainly too late to fashion anything by her own hand, and the embarrassment of rushing into town only to buy an arbitrary trinket would be too much to bear. Having used up all the batter, Anne squelched the embers under the stove as she lamented the prospect of disappointing Gilbert once again with the inattentiveness of her friendship.

No sooner had Anne returned to her bedroom following the delightful breakfast of warm pancakes and carefree conversation with Marilla and Matthew when her troubled thoughts flooded back into the forefront of her mind. Feeling suddenly lightheaded, she sat on the edge of her lace bedspread. She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed again at the skin below, hoping in vain that the violet hue would recede shortly.

As she opened her eyes, her gaze fell upon the stack of pages piled in the upper corner of her writing desk. She rose from the bed, moving to finger through the unfinished letters. The sentence fragments stood bold against the cream of the pages, the efforts of her mind these past months unequivocal in the loops of her lettering. Anne ran the heel of her palm over a page which she had crumpled in frustration, smoothing the harsh creases.

Scanning the words, the shadow of guilt seeped further into her, twisting into a knot in her stomach. Though the thoughts gracing the parchment were decidedly unfinished, they offered a broken apology and the hint of an explanation as to her months-long silence. Though she hesitated to admit it, Anne knew the pages in her hands were no longer hers to keep.

A lick of hope flared inside her as she collected the letters from the desk, straightening them against the glossy surface. Pulling a thin ribbon from her dresser, she tied the pages together, double-knotting the bow for good measure. Undoubtedly, the small bundle of parchment would not be the best Christmas gift Gilbert had ever received, but Anne hoped that delivering her words to him late would be a better remedy for her wanton neglect than to remain silent on the point forever.

Pleased with herself for coming up with a solution for both of her problems at once, she slipped out of the house, the corners of the parchment peeking out of her coat pocket.

The dying light of the afternoon warmed Anne’s cheeks, ruddy from the cold and exercise, as she stepped onto the porch of the stone cottage. Stamping the snow from her boots, she pulled the letters from her pocket, running a hand over them tenderly. She plucked at the bow which had become cockeyed on the journey over, returning its shape to the original set of even loops.

Peering into the glass beside the door, Anne made out the shape of three figures sat around the dinner table, their heads bowed and hands clasped in each others. Steam rose from the dishes between them and the flame of the candles danced in the breaths of their whispered words.

Not wanting to disturb the family, Anne receded from the window, bending to leave the small bundle at the foot of the door. As she turned away, a muffled guffaw escaped from inside the house, followed by a smattering of laughter and the clink of serving spoons against ceramic.
Anne smiled, tugging her scarf up over her frostbitten nose as she descended the stairs into the falling dusk.
A Boy Resolved

A gasp escaped Gilbert’s lips as the floorboards of the porch gave way beneath his boot. Catching himself on the door frame, he looked down, his eyes taking a few moments to focus in the dim light cast by the fireplace inside. He crouched, making out the edges of the parchment against the wooden floor. A thin ribbon hugged the pages loosely, evidently having come undone under his foot.

Quickly, he scooped the papers into his hands, tucking them into his coat pocket for the time being. Straightening, he resumed the task that had brought him out into the chilly dusk air initially. Leaning over the wood pile, he gripped two thick pine logs, one in each hand, before shuffling back into the warmth of the living room.

Mary smiled at him fondly as he knelt by the fireplace, tucking each log into the dwindling embers. He blew lightly on the few remaining flames, coaxing the fire back to life. Soon, it was roaring once again, throwing an orange glow across the room.

Rocking back on his heels, he pulled the pages from his pocket and examined them in the light of the fire. The words Dear Gilbert, were nearly obscured under a swatch of dirt matching the impression of the underside of his shoe. He brushed at it gently with his thumb.

“What ya’ got there, Blythe?” Bash spoke from the couch beside his wife, both of whom were watching his peculiar actions with knit brows.

“I think they’re letters for me,” he said slowly, eyes not straying from the pages he sifted through in his hands. His heart stopped as his gaze fell on the words Love, Anne.

“Who from?” Mary asked curiously.

“Anne,” he breathed, but perhaps not in response to her question, for his eyes raised as his gaze fell on the words Love, Anne.

“Who from?” Mary asked curiously.

“Anne,” he breathed, but perhaps not in response to her question, for his eyes raised as his gaze fell on the words Love, Anne.

Bash cocked an eyebrow, a smile spreading across his cheeks as he leaned forward toward the entranced boy. “That’s girl’s got ya’ brain all in a muddle now, Blythe. Tell us, what she say?”

Hardly hearing the man’s words, Gilbert lurched to his feet. Grabbing a candle from the mantle, he bid the two a hurried goodnight before disappearing down the dark hallway into his room. Settling on the edge of the bed, Gilbert slid the boots from his feet as he began to read the first letter.

Not until the flame of his candle died out, swathing him in darkness, did Gilbert lift his eyes from Anne’s words. Leaning back into his pillows, he stretched the muscles in his back that had grown weary from hunching over the pages. A wave of exhaustion crashing over him, Gilbert sunk deeper into the bed.

Despite his body’s argument, Gilbert’s mind kept him from sleep, thoughts of Anne consuming his consciousness. She had written that she missed him. The ensuing image of her at home, longing for him as he had for her these past months filled his vision. He thought of his fingers on her smooth skin and of her arms around his neck. The way her eyes came alight with fire when she read aloud. He imagined the delicate brush of her pen as she had written Love, with thoughts of him in her mind.

Burying his hand in the pocket of his trousers, Gilbert pulled the small ring from the fabric depths and held it gently between his fingers. It gleamed slightly, illuminated by the moonlight filtering in from the window. The sudden image in his mind of the band on a delicate, pale finger caused his chest to constrict as he confronted what he had known subconsciously for some time now.
He wanted to marry Anne.

Given everything that had passed in his nineteen years, Gilbert knew he was mature for his young age. The loss of his father and the management of the farm had taught him to be fiercely independent; he knew how to look out for himself and his family. And now, with the promise of a medical degree on the near horizon and a steady position at Dr. Ward’s office following in its wake, he was secure in his ability to provide for them. But even his eight months away on the steamer had not prepared him for the loneliness that had clawed at him since leaving for Kingsport. Being unable to reach Anne, save for in his dreams at night, had nearly convinced him that her existence was a figment of his imagination. Seeing her again last night, haloed in firelight, he knew he could never have conjured up a more angelic woman if he tried.

Yes, he wanted her. And if the letters, now scattered across his bedspread, were any indication, the odds were decidedly in his favor. There was no reason to wait.

Fingers wrapped tightly around the silver band and mind resolved to seek out Mr. Cuthbert as soon as he was able, Gilbert drifted into unconsciousness.
Waking with a jolt, Gilbert squinted into the bright light pouring in through the windowpanes of his bedroom. Stumbling from the bed, he dragged a hand over his face and moved to pull the curtains over the windows. The snow in the field outside gleamed at him as he obscured it from view. Safely shrouded in the muted morning light, he turned back towards the bed, rubbing the scruff under his chin thoughtfully as he took in the mess of papers strewn across the bedspread and the floor.

Absently, he reached into his trousers’ pocket to run a finger over the silver band, only to feel his fingers splay empty against the fabric. Panic ensnared his chest as he searched the other pocket, again feeling nothing in the thick linen of the lining.

He threw himself to the floor, scanning the uneven hardwood for a glimmer of silver. Shimmying to his left, he craned his neck to peer into the shade of the bed frame.

“Good Lord, Blythe,” Bash’s loud voice made Gilbert jump, slamming his head into the wooden frame. Gilbert rolled out from underneath the bed, rubbing the back of his head. He squinted up at Bash, who looked down at him in amusement. “Having a nice nap on the floor, were we?” Bash poked at him. Gilbert scrambled to his feet as Bash took in the pages scattered about the room.

“I was looking for something,” Gilbert said shortly. He moved toward the dresser opposite the door, yanking on the handles and sifting through the contents of each drawer with his free hand.

Bash took a few steps into the room. A sparkle on the bedspread caught his attention, and he leaned toward it, shuffling some pages out of the way. The delicate band fell into his weathered palm, and he let out a low whistle.

Gilbert spun around, eyes locking with Bash’s as he held the ring up between them. “No doubt you were looking for this?” he said. His eyes sparkled as he looked at the boy from the steamer in a new light.

Gilbert flushed and took the ring from his hand, depositing it safely back into his pocket. He scowled at the man. “What? No cheeky remark? Were they all out of glib comments at the grocer today?”

Bash shook his head, smiling. “I never thought I’d see the day you’d admit you were gone over that girl, Blythe. I’m afraid I will have to come up with new things to twit you about once that ring lands on that pretty girl’s finger.” He shook his head again and stood, extending a hand to his young friend. “I’m proud of you, Blythe.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Gilbert clasped the man’s hand in his own, a smile cracking across his face. If only his father were here to see him now.

Bash pulled Gilbert to him, clapping his free hand on his back, the force of it making Gilbert stumble on his feet.

“Aye, Mary!” Bash called into the hallway, winking at Gilbert, who returned the mischievous gesture with a scowl. His eyes pleaded with the older man to stay silent on the matter, but it was quickly evident to Gilbert that his desire to keep his intentions solely between the two of them was out of the question.

Lowering his voice, Bash said, almost apologetically, “Now, Blythe, you know I can’t keep a secret from Mary any better than you can keep the blush from your cheeks when your Anne is around.”
A deep flush rose in Gilbert’s neck, curling into his cheeks and into the tips of his ears. Bash guffawed, pulling the younger man back to him and affectionately ruffling his hair with a dizzying roughness.

Gilbert stumbled again when Bash finally released him. Eyeing Bash warily as he moved into the hallway with a renewed call for his wife, Gilbert threw his hands through his hair, shaking the curls back into their original position.

Gilbert’s bare feet fell softly against the hardwood floors as he huffed and rolled up his sleeves, following Bash down the hallway into the kitchen. The man was putting his weight against the table as he leaned over the bowl his wife was attending to, whisk in hand and white smudge bright against her dark cheek. Bash still wore the stupid grin he had donned in Gilbert’s room moments prior, but Mary’s lips were twisted in bemusement as her gaze shifted from her husband to the young man entering the room.

“Come now, Blythe! Tell Mary here what ya’ planning to do!” His eyes twinkled with thinly veiled excitement. Gilbert reflected for a moment on how strikingly this older man resembled a child just given a few cents to spend at the sweet shop. Gilbert rolled his eyes and shook his head as he leaned against the doorframe. He crossed his arms defensively.

“I'm not planning to do anything,” Gilbert insisted. At Bash’s pointed look, he added, somewhat embarrassed, “Yet.” He really would have preferred never having this conversation.

“Alright, but you’ve already got the ring!” Bash said eagerly. Mary’s eyebrows rose at this, her eyes leaving the bowl before her to find Gilbert’s gaze from across the room. Gilbert returned her questioning look with a small nod, confirming the truth of her husband’s words. Mary swallowed, saying nothing, her gaze falling back to the batter.

Bash, clearly failing to notice the marked shift in his wife’s body language, barreled on. “Of course, I can help ya’ plan the proposal.” He clapped his hands, then spread them in the air in front of him. “Oh yes, Blythe. I can just see it now!”

Gilbert cut in before he could say anything more. “Thanks, but I think I can handle this on my own.” His gaze hadn’t left the pinched brows on Mary’s face. “Mary?” he prompted her.

Mary set the bowl aside and looked squarely at the young man, intention dictating her every move. He held her pointed gaze evenly, preparing himself for whatever this woman, who he had come to respect as if she were his own mother, had to say.

“Are you certain you are ready for this?” she asked, her voice even. Her husband stilled beside her, his demeanor finally slowing to match the gravity of the discussion. “Gilbert, you and Anne are still so young.” She shook her head as she gazed at the man who was still a boy in her eyes.

Gilbert swallowed, nodding slowly. “I know, Mary. But after everything that has happened…” He trailed off, his voice faltering as thoughts of his father flooded his mind.

“I'm a man now, and I know what I want,” he said with more certainty after a few moments.

Frustration knotted in his chest at the doubtful look Mary returned to him. At first, he thought she was laughing at him, most likely for claiming that he was grown. But as he held her gaze, he recognized fear in the tightness around her eyes.

Gilbert frowned, hugging his crossed arms tighter to his torso. He searched the woman’s face for a hint at what had brought on her frighten expression, but the rigidity of her features offered him
nothing. She would not speak against him without provocation. Giving up, he raised his hands in exasperation.

“Mary, why are you against me in this? Do you have reason to believe that she doesn’t care for me?” A sour thought suddenly occurred to him, and though he feared the answer, he had to know. The frustration in his voice replaced with unease, he asked, “Did she say something contrary to you?” He thought he might be sick if she responded in the affirmative.

Mary shook her head, waving off the suggestion with a light flourish of her hand. “No, no. I don’t doubt that Anne cares for you. But, even if that be the case, it doesn’t mean that she is ready to hear what you’ve got to say.”

Anger flared in Gilbert’s chest, sending tendrils of heat down his arms and into his neck. Clearly, Mary was speaking nonsense now. If Anne returned his affections, what else was there to consider? He looked desperately to Bash for support, the tendons in his neck straining against the fury rising in his body.

Finding himself on the other side of Gilbert’s piercing stare, Bash raised his palms in the air defensively. “I know you’ve been gone over this girl for years, Blythe, but I wouldn’t bet against Mary when it comes to the understanding of a woman’s mind.”

Gilbert growled at Bash’s noncommittal response. He looked between the pair in front of him, failing to find any trace of the lighthearted excitement of only moments ago. Defeated, he turned from the kitchen and stomped back to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Flinging himself onto his bedspread, he stared up at the bare ceiling as tears pricked at his eyes. Why had Mary disapproved so immediately? It wasn’t because she didn’t like Anne. No, Gilbert was sure that she and Anne had even become friendly in his absence. What had she meant by it doesn’t mean she is ready to hear what you’ve got to say? He and Anne had been dancing around each other for months now, arguably years. If she wasn’t ready now, Gilbert feared she never would be.

The confusion and frustration tumbling over in the forefront of his mind was deafening. Letting out a groan, Gilbert stuffed a pillow over his face, hoping to block out the thoughts nagging at his resolve.
“Il était une bergère,
Et ron, ron, ron, petit patapon.
Il était une bergère,
Qui gardait ses moutons,
Ron, Ron,
Qui gardait ses moutons.”

For once, Anne paid no mind to the rhyme falling from Jerry’s lips as the cart bumped along to Charlottetown. If Anne had not been so occupied with her own thoughts, she would have pleaded with him to stop singing before her ears bled. Instead, she sat stoically beside him, gaze unfocused on the passing snow-covered fields.

Christmas had been a few days prior, and Jerry’s first task upon returning from holiday leave was to accompany Anne into town to pick up a few essentials. Much to Jerry’s surprise, Anne hadn’t groaned at Marilla’s indication that she needed to be escorted into town. Rather, she had merely nodded and clambered into the waiting cart.

After they had traveled a fair distance down the road, and Jerry had ceased his singing, the lilt of Anne’s voice filled the silence that stretched between them.

“There is so much hope in the turn of a new year, isn’t there?” Anne asked, as if speaking to no one in particular, her gaze still resting on the blur of the passing fields.

Jerry hesitated, unsure of whether or not her question was rhetorical. Anne turned towards him after a few moments passed without an answer.

“I mean, it’s the chance for a fresh start. A new year with no mistakes in it yet,” she said. Jerry squinted at her, hearing the twinge of sorrow underlying her words.

“I suppose,” he agreed. He paused, considering the year that lay ahead of Anne. “It will be a big year for you, what with your exams and college and all.” Anne merely nodded, swallowing hard.

“I’m scared, Jer,” she whispered, almost inaudible other the hoofbeats on the frozen path. He gave her a quizzical look, prompting her to continue. “It is almost like a cruel joke. For the first time in my life, I have everything I ever dreamed of as a child. I have friends and a family. I know where I belong. But I fear that it is all about to be taken away.”

Jerry considered her words as he guided the horse around a bend in the drive, putting a slight pressure on the reins. “No doubt your life will change,” he offered slowly. “But everything you built here, nothing and no one can take that away from you, Anne.”

She nodded, turning away to face the passing fields once more. For a long while, she said nothing, taking in his words. Anne knew he was right, of course, but she couldn’t help the knot that turned in her stomach when she thought of relinquishing her newfound childhood so soon.

“What are you going to do this year?” Anne asked eventually, trying to lift the gravity that had settled in the air between them. “Any resolutions for the new year?”

Jerry gave her a small smile, shaking his head. “Eh, no. Not for me.”

Anne furrowed her brow as she registered the sorrowful tone of Jerry’s voice. “Why not?” she
prompted. “There’s got to be something you long to accomplish this year!”

The boy shook his head again in solemn response. “I intend to stay on at Green Gables for as long as Marilla and Matthew will have me. It’s where my family needs me to be.”

Anne nodded as understanding settled over her. Slumping back into the seat of the cart, her heart ached for the farmhand beside her, for the future just out of his grasp. It didn’t seem fair that he should have naught to look forward to in the coming year other than overseeing another harvest.

The pair continued their journey in silence, both thinking on the prospect of the new year with apprehension. Soon, the first shingled shops of Charlottetown came into view, and Jerry slowed the horse to a gentle trot. After a cursory scan of the main road, Anne pointed to an available hitching post in front of the butcher’s shop. Once Jerry had expertly steered the horse and cart to the side of the street, Anne hopped down from the seat, landing lightly on the packed earth.

“How long will you be at the smithy’s?” Anne asked, tilting her chin up to watch Jerry scramble down after her. “I shouldn’t be more than half an hour at the general store.”

Jerry nodded. “That should be plenty of time for me. I’ll meet you back here at quarter past then?” he said, raising a hand to squint at the hands on the clocktower throwing a shadow over a large swath of the road.

Anne agreed, and lingered by the cart as she watched Jerry cross the busy street and disappear out of sight. Patting Belle briefly, Anne turned away and set off in the opposing direction.

The general store was only a few shops down from where they had disembarked the cart. Stepping into the familiar store, she breathed in the smell of dusty crates and dried spices. She waved in greeting to the clerk behind the counter, moving to the far corner of the store where the baking ingredients were shelved.

Anne hummed to herself as she surveyed the shelves, finally selecting a sack of flour and another of sugar. Shifting the weight of the bags against her hip, she meandered down the aisle, her eyes falling on a small red box. She stopped in front of it, eyes scanning the label. *Chocolate caramels.* Her mouth watered, imagining the caramel melting over her tongue, the chocolate soft on her lips. Though she knew Marilla wouldn’t be pleased, Anne could already picture Matthew’s smile as he popped one into his mouth when his sister’s back was turned. Besides, she could share some of them with Jerry on the way back to Green Gables. They were both in need of something sweet. Before she could change her mind, she slipped a package of the candies from the display, clutching it to her chest as she continued on.

Once she had gathered everything on her list, Anne placed the items on the counter along with the box of caramels. Exchanging pleasantries with the clerk, she handed him the appropriate amount before exiting the store, arms laden with bags.

Anne was huffing by the time she reached the cart, thankful for the walk being as brief as it was. Abandoning the bags by the wheel, she pressed a palm to her stomach, urging herself to recover her breathing. She leaned against the cart, sucking small amounts of air through her teeth, as she had learned to do when she found herself struggling to breathe in the confines of the corset.

As she stood in the street, her breaths becoming more regular, her gaze fell on the window display of the adjacent tailor’s shop. A long white gown hung elegantly from a dress form, lace dribbling from every seam in a cascade of delicate ruffles. Enraptured, Anne moved towards the window until she stood directly before the regal dress, very nearly smudging her nose against the glass as she peered at it.
Anne had never lost her childhood fantasy of being a beautiful bride, and now, standing before the most elegant wedding gown she had ever laid eyes upon, Anne couldn’t help imagining the delicate lace against her skin. Her eyes fluttered shut as she pictured herself, Marilla’s veil shrouding her face, placing one foot daintily in front of the other as she walked down the aisle. Diana and Cole grinned at her from the pews as she passed them, floating towards the altar in a cloud of snow-white lace. Coming upon the front of the church, she raised her head to look into the face of her beloved, only to find that she could not make it out.

Brow furrowing, Anne shook herself from her daydream, finding herself once again on the side of the road, admiring the expensive gown through the window. She sighed heavily, acknowledging that it was all for the best. She may be looking forward to becoming a bride, but the idea of being a wife still struck fear into her heart as strongly as it had the day the minister had sat across from her in the sitting room in Green Gables all those years before.

“Anne?”

She turned quickly from the window at the familiar voice.

“Gilbert!” She greeted him brightly. Her gaze ran over him briefly, absorbing the rose in his cheeks and the broad bend of his shoulders. She hadn’t seen him in nearly a week, and she realized that she had missed the sight of him. “How have you been? Did you find my letters?”

The rose in Gilbert’s cheeks deepened as he nodded. “Indeed, I did.” He gazed at her unflinchingly, and Anne felt a heat start to tickle at her own cheeks. “Thank you for giving them to me.”

If he kept looking at her the way he was now, as if trying to read all the writing on her soul, Anne was uncertain how long she could continue to remain upright under his penetrating gaze. She shifted uncomfortably, dropping her eyes to his boots.

Another moment passed before he heard him ask, “So, you’re here looking at wedding dresses?”

Startled, Anne’s head snapped up to see him inclining his head toward the lacy gown in the window she had been admiring, brow arched quizzically. She blushed harder as she shook her head. “No, no. I was just—just admiring it is all. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” She peeked a side-glance at him, catching his eyes slide over her.

“You would look beautiful in it,” he agreed, catching her glance. Anne felt the flames on her skin as his brown eyes lingered on her. They were soft, not judging as she had first expected. He was, Anne realized with a jolt, admiring her.

She swallowed, the lump in her throat rendering her breathing labored and uneven. Her mind spun. She had to leave, had to escape from the thickness of the air surrounding the man in front of her, but the tenderness in his gaze locked her to where she stood. Unable to escape, a panic began to stir in her chest.

“Anne.”

Jerry’s voice shattered the viscosity in the air. She sucked air between her teeth as she turned toward the newcomer, the panic in her chest evident in the look she shot him. Jerry’s dark eyes flicked to the curly-haired man, sizing up the situation.

“Gilbert. Good to see you,” he said politely, extending his palm. Gilbert shook it firmly before replying.

“Jerry, right?” He eyed the farmhand, clearly irritated at his intrusion.
Jerry nodded a confirmation. “Well, Anne and I had really best get going. Take care.” Not waiting for a reply, he turned to Anne, extending a hand to help her up into the cart. She took it gratefully, her hands trembling.

Anne smoothed her skirts as Jerry climbed up beside her, having stowed the bags Anne had abandoned in the back of the cart. As he guided the cart back into the road, she gave Gilbert a tight smile, leaving him in front of the tailor’s, an indistinct emotion etched into his features.

It wasn’t until the din of the city had dissipated into the distance that Jerry dared to break the silence radiating off of Anne.

“What was that about?” he asked. Though quiet, his voice was thick with an emotion Anne couldn’t quite place.

After a few heartbeats, she muttered, “You were right. Cole was right. God, I’m so foolish to have thought…” She trailed off, obscuring her face with her gloved hands.

Jerry’s brows pinched in confusion. “Right about what?”

Anne glared at him, not wanting to be forced to say it aloud. When Jerry’s face remained blank, she huffed, leaning back in her seat.

“He fancies me.”

Jerry barely stifled a scoff. On the verge of uttering a sarcastic retort, he discarded the jest for a more tactful response given the glower Anne was currently boring into the side of his head.

“Is that really so bad?” he asked, daring to meet her dark gaze. She blinked.

After a few moments she responded, “I don’t rightly know.”
Anne had hardly slept a wink that night. No sooner had her eyelids fluttered closed, sagging with the exhaustion of the events of the afternoon, than sunlight streamed into her gabled bedroom, signaling the start of a new day.

Anne grumbled, squinting into the bright rays, before turning over to bury her face in her pillow. An ache throbbed in her temple.

A few minutes passed as she breathed into the cushion, the tumult of her mind gradually gaining traction as the liberating touch of sleep relinquished its grasp on her body. Golden-flecked eyes gazed at her from behind her closed lids, clenching around her heart.

Anne sighed heavily, rolling over onto her back so that she might stare at the stuccoed ceiling instead. Finding the deep brown of his eyes to exist there as well, she groaned. Righting herself, she ran a hand through her tousled hair before sliding off of the bed.

The bare skin under her feet protested against the chill of the floorboards, but Anne padded to her dresser nonetheless, determined to find a distraction from the gaze that pierced her mind. Feeling almost numb from lack of sleep, she scooped her corset from its place on a nearby chair. She inhaled sharply as she wriggled into it, letting the breath hiss through her teeth as she settled it around her. Her deft fingers caught the laces against her back, pulling them snug with a practiced expertise. She sighed again as her fingers looped the free ends into a tight bow, dropping limply to her sides when they had finished.

Anne considered her reflection in the glass, turning to assess the curve of her figure. On any other occasion she might have been pleased with how womanly she appeared, the gentle curve of her back giving way to the straight lines of her neck and jaw, her small bosoms enhanced by the corset to compliment the slightness of her frame. Anne soured at herself, sucking in her cheeks as she turned to face her reflection head-on.

Selecting the comb from atop the dresser, she dragged it through her hair, gritting her teeth as it snagged painfully on the knots in the strands. Fisting the end of it in one hand, she ripped at it impatiently, fraying the broken ends. She let out another long, dramatic groan as she set the comb back down, methodically collecting the fiery locks in her fingers and gathering the strands at the back of her head.

She glimpsed herself in the glass, halting the work of her fingers. As she gazed at herself, she lowered her hands, allowing the red strands to spill unrestrained over her shoulders. A strange desire crept into Anne’s mind as she stared at the young woman in the mirror. Slowly, she took the comb back into her hands, raising it to part her hair evenly. The two chunks fell against either side of her face. Her nimble fingers glided over each section, plaiting them neatly as they had countless times before.

Anne shifted back on her heel as she absorbed her reflection. The braids around her face softened her jaw, restoring a figment of youth to her complexion. Her fingertips skimmed over the smooth plaits gingerly, as if in reverence to a memory she had not known she had.

The juvenile plaits did little to diminish the firmness of her brow and the high arch of her cheeks, poignant indications of the adolescence she was leaving behind. A shadow of grief washed over Anne’s features as she gazed at the young woman masquerading as a child, chest constricting as if in mourning something precious lost.
The fall of approaching footsteps jolted Anne from her solemnity. Thinking that Marilla shouldn’t like to find her standing half-dressed and gazing stupidly at the plaits in her hair, she tugged on the ribbons roughly, letting the weaves fall loose about her shoulders once more. The heel of Marilla’s boot against the floorboards grew louder as she neared Anne’s bedroom. Hurriedly, she pulled a pale yellow gown from the dresser, stepping into and fumbling to fasten the buttons with trembling hands.

“Anne?” Marilla’s voice drifted through the wood of the closed door. She knocked lightly, entering without invitation. She frowned at the state of Anne’s undress.

Anne shot her an apologetic look as she gathered her red locks once more, pinning them loosely behind her head.

“Come down as soon as you’re ready. Breakfast is already on the table. I thought perhaps that you could aid me in cleaning the floors today. You know my back has been giving me quite the trouble as of late.”

Anne nodded, exhaustion thickening her mind, rendering her unable to protest the onerous task. Even if she had been of a mind to argue, she likely would not have. At present, she could benefit from the distraction of chores.

Marilla raised an eyebrow, clearly taken aback at the lack of argument from the redhead. She looked her up and down once before nodding stiffly and leaving the room, pulling the door shut behind her with a gentle click.

Anne wiped the back of her hand across her forehead, beads of sweat dissolving into the fabric of the scarf tied over her hairline. She rocked back on her haunches, letting the scrub brush in her hand fall with a splash into the bucket by her knee. Absently, she massaged the ache in her arms as she surveyed the gleaming floor.

She had been hard at work for some hours, though the light of day still filtered through the window panes, illuminating the damp floorboards around her. Only a small section at the base of the stairs remained matte in the sunlight.

Rising to her feet, she grasped the handle of the bucket, lifting it carefully so as not to spill the liquid inside onto the freshly scrubbed floors. Anne moved towards the staircase, settling down at the base of it. With a sigh, she dipped her hand into the bucket, shaking the brush over it as she lifted it from the water.

Soon she had lost herself once again in the rhythm of her movements, scrubbing back and forth against the grain of the wooden floorboards, the liquid seeping from between the bristles tinted with dirt and dust. The work was a welcome distraction from the carousel of her thoughts, though each pause of the brush allowed Gilbert’s form to materialize more fully at the forefront of her mind.

“You would look beautiful in it.” She blanched at the memory of his words, dripping with sweet sincerity as he gazed down at her. Anne shook her head, renewing the fervor with which she scrubbed the floorboards, hoping in vain that it would rub out the memory of his eyes on her along with the grime between the wood panels. Anne bit her lip as the tension in her chest tightened as she thought of him. She could still feel the spark of his touch on her cheek as plainly as if it had just happened…

“Anne, are you quite alright? You look pale.” Anne hadn’t heard Marilla enter, looking up at the
woman in startled surprise. The memory of Gilbert’s fingers on her cheek receded as Marilla regarded her.

“Perhaps you should take a break,” Marilla suggested, concern folded into her words. “I’ve baked more than enough scones for you to take some up to Mary. You haven’t seen her in some time, as I recall.”

Anne swallowed hard at the prospect of visiting the stone cottage, the potential of encountering Gilbert again so soon setting her nerves on end, though out of fear or something else, she couldn’t say. Anne shook her head in response to Marilla’s proposal, thinking it better to avoid him for the time being.

“Really, Anne. I think the fresh air would do you a world of good,” Marilla pushed, hands resting on her hips in an authoritative pose.

“I’m fine, Marilla,” Anne said earnestly, though keeping her gaze from quite meeting the woman’s stern eyes. “Besides, I don’t want to intrude.”

Marilla scoffed. “Since when have you, Anne Shirley-Cuthbert, worried yourself over intruding on the hospitality of others?” Anne winced at the personal affront but did not speak to defend herself, instead applying the scrub brush in her hand against the floor with renewed vigor.

Marilla sighed, giving up. “You never cease to confound me, Anne,” she muttered, turning away from the kitchen.

As her footsteps faded into the house, the image of Gilbert, all curly hair and strong jaw, flooded back into Anne’s mind. From the safety of her imagination, she could study his face without reproach. Even as the heat of his gaze seared into her, she couldn’t deny the warmth it stirred inside her. It was almost... pleasant.

Color rose into her pallid features as she surprised herself with the realization that his attention was not wholly unwelcome. The ghost of his touch burned into her cheek, making her heart stutter as she knelt alone on the kitchen floor.

Despite the giddiness rising in her chest, a shadow of fear hung over her heart, impenetrable. Her mind rested on the image of herself in the mirror, plaits framing her face, the countenance of a woman longing for a childhood that was leaving her behind.

No, Anne resolved, clenching her hands into fists and bringing them to shield the turmoil playing across her features. She would act as if her revelation about Gilbert’s feelings had never occurred, so determined was she to hang onto the easy nature of their friendship, fearing the sprawling unknown of what lie ahead if she succumbed to the warmth his touch left on her skin.
Gilbert cursed as he lost his footing in the snow, the branches in his hands tumbling into the white powder as he reached out to steady himself against a nearby tree. Groaning, he bent to pluck the sticks from the drifts, careful to maintain his firm stance on the icy ground.

The branches safely under his arm once more, he preceded slowly toward the pile he had been accruing at the mouth of the orchard. A bitter storm had blown through Avonlea on the second day of the new year, knocking loose a number of branches in the orchard, even felling a handful of the saplings he had planted the prior spring. Feeling cooped up in the small cottage, Gilbert had elected to spend the afternoon among the apple trees, clearing away the debris.

The comfortable silence of the orchard was familiar to him. After his father had passed, Gilbert had spent countless hours here, turning over thoughts to the whisper of bare branches in the breeze, much as he was doing now.

The image of a redheaded woman had consumed his thoughts and haunted his nights since their chance encounter some days prior on the streets of Charlottetown. He recalled how he had felt he must be in a dream, discovering her in front of the shop, lips parted as she admired the gown in the window. When she had turned toward him, cheeks flushed and eyes wide, he was sure he had never seen a more alluring creature in all his life. Since that day, the liquid sapphire of her eyes, made brighter by her surprise at finding him beside her, gazed at him in wonder every time he closed his own.

His heart ached as he peered up into the barren branches overhead. The cold light of the sun was working steadily across the swatch of blue among the clouds, and Gilbert couldn’t help but wish that he could freeze it where it hung in the sky. He was due back in Kingsport for the inception of the spring term in a matter of days, but the thought of leaving Avonlea without seeing Anne again was one he refused to entertain for long. If only he really could stop time, even for just a few hours. Anything to postpone the inevitable devastation of being separated from her again.

Gilbert sighed, having dropped the branches in his arms on the pile and trudging back into the tangle of trees. He rubbed a gloved hand over his face, hoping to instill some sense into his brain. Thoughts of Anne often left him feeling a bit drunk, a hazy look coming to his eye which Bash had come to find all too familiar, lending him the habit of quickly pointing out when the fog fell over Gilbert’s features.

Coming across a larger branch, Gilbert paused the pining of his thoughts to assess the best way to balance the uneven load in his arms. Finally settling on dragging it through the snow rather than shouldering its full weight, he stooped to hoist the thick end over his shoulder. Straightening, he steadied the limb with both hands, leaving his fingers wrapped around the trunk as he began the slow procession back to the wood pile.

The unexpected snap of a branch off to his right pulled his focus from the snow under his boots. He air departed his lungs as his gaze locked with sapphire eyes wide in shock. The redheaded woman was frozen mid-step, the palm of her small hand pressed against the trunk of the tree beside her. She looked every bit the dryad of her own youthful imaginings, dwarfed by the trees that enveloped her, the copper waves of her hair cascading loosely over her shoulders.

“I- I’m sorry,” she stammered, the whisper of her voice reminding Gilbert to breathe. He dragged a breath through his lips as he stooped to deposit the branch on the ground beside him, all the while not daring to take his eyes from the young woman, lest she disappear into the trees.
“I was on my way to see Mary. Sometimes I cut through the orchard,” she said, in way of explaining her presence before him.

A moment or two later, Gilbert replied with the most coherent thought he could piece together. “Isn’t it faster by way of the road?”

Anne blushed. “Yes, well, some days I enjoy taking the more scenic route.” A heartbeat passed between them before she spoke, apologizing once again. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you.” She began to turn away from him.

“Anne, wait!” Gilbert was taken slightly aback by the pleading tone of his voice. He cleared his throat as she turned back toward him. Heart thudding in his chest, he closed the distance between them in a few short strides.

“I was actually hoping to run into you again.”

“Oh?” Anne raised her brows at his admission. Gilbert could make out the edge of a tooth tugging at her lower lip.

“I’m going back to Kingsport day after tomorrow,” he continued.

“Oh?” she repeated. “I didn’t realize you were going back so soon.”

“Yes, well,” Gilbert trailed off, thrown by the way she avoided meeting his gaze. She seemed transfixed on the topmost clasp of his coat, and he glanced down at it briefly to see if it had come loose. It hadn’t.

“Anne, there was something I wanted to discuss with you, or ask you, rather, before I left,” he ventured. He was rewarded with the upward tilt of her chin as she finally met his gaze, her sapphire eyes guarded.

Gently, he reached for her hand, taking it in his own and squeezing her fingers lightly. Her gaze fell to their entwined fingers, her body stiffening.

“I am sure it comes as no surprise to hear that I care about you, Anne. In truth, I have admired you for many years now.” Gilbert sucked in another unsteady breath as he whispered into the space between them, Anne’s head still bowed over their joined hands. The confession that had sat on the edge of his tongue for months finally fell into the apple orchard, mingling with their shaking breaths. “I think of you constantly, Anne. I can’t help it. You consume every waking hour and every sleepless night.” He felt her fingers tightened around his, and his heart swelled.

With his free hand he reached into his pocket, fingers closing around the small band. He opened his mouth to continue as he brought it up between them, his fevered gaze finally falling on Anne’s ashen face. She was trembling against him.

“Please, Gilbert,” she whispered, her sapphire eyes wide and imploring. “Please don’t say something our friendship cannot recover from.” A tear trickled down her cheek.

Gilbert’s heart sank into his toes at the rejection plain across her aggrieved features. Tears rushed to his eyes, pausing precariously on the edge of his lashes.

“I can’t merely be friends with you, Anne,” he whispered, voice so broken he hardly recognized it as his own. “I care for you too much.”

Anne fought back the sob rising in her throat, her hand free from Gilbert’s grasp pressing hard
against the bodice of her dress. Anger found its way into her tear-streaked face, boiling ominously in the set of her jaw and the tightening of her eyes.

“If you claim to care so much for me, why would you put me in this position?” She nearly spit the words at him, the chill of her grief morphing into the heat of anger.

Bewildered by the disastrous turn of the conversation, Gilbert succumbed to the fury rising in his own chest. “I dare say we wouldn’t be in this position if you would submit to being honest with yourself about how you feel about me!”

Anne recoiled from him as the truth of his words assaulted her resolve. Catching the waver in her anger, Gilbert drew her close to him, crushing her small hand in his iron grip. “Tell me plain, Anne. Do you truly have no affection for me in your heart?”

His breathing was pained as he waited for her reply. She was closer to him now than she had ever been before. In that moment, Gilbert could picture a parallel existence in which he could bend down to press his lips against hers and revel in the intimacy of her touch, but the heated tension between them now could not be farther from that fantasy.

A renewed stream of tears stained her cheeks as she looked up into his face, meeting his piercing gaze steadily for the first time.

“I do not.”

A sob escaped her throat as his face crumbled before her.

“It’s all in your head.”
Anne clutched herself as she half-ran, half-stumbled out of the orchard, vision blinded by the hot tears welling in her eyes. She felt as if she might be sick, but the twisting knot in her stomach was not enough to slow her flight. Every fiber of her being tremored. Anne wished for nothing more than to be under the protective haven of her bedsheets, the constraining semblances of womanhood stripped from her body so that she might be free to sob and heave as heavily as she pleased.

Her cries sputtered in her throat as the mossy shingles of Green Gables came into view. The sight of her home offered little comfort as she descended the drive, her knees knocking together. The mouth-watering smell of baking biscuits drifting from the house was lost on Anne as she used the last vestiges of her strength to climb the porch steps and slip through the front door. At last within the safety of the house, Anne collapsed at Marilla’s feet, shaking like an autumn leaf, thin and torn.

Marilla knelt beside her, putting her slender arms around her distraught daughter. Anne reached up to hold the woman tighter, her fingertips digging into her shoulder blades as she sobbed into the collar of Marilla’s blouse. The older woman cradled her, gently running her fingers over Anne’s red waves in a comforting motion. She didn’t speak as the girl gradually stilled against her, the heaves of her body giving way to exhaustion.

Matthew had heard the whole commotion from his bedroom upstairs where he had been changing his shirt for supper. Alarmed at Anne’s distressed cries, he had fumbled with the final buttons, ultimately abandoning them to shuffle from the room and down the stairs. As he descended the flight, he came across the two women huddled together on the floor. Marilla gazed at him, tears glistening in her bewildered eyes. Unsure what to do, but not having the heart to leave Anne when she was so evidently upset, he hovered over them silently.

“Matthew, fetch a glass of water,” Marilla said finally. He nodded, lurching towards the kitchen, glad to be able to be of some help. Within moments he returned with the glass, handing it gingerly to his sister.

Disentangling herself from Anne, Marilla offered her the glass, which she accepted gratefully. Still with a slight tremor in his hands, Anne tipped the glass to her lips, taking a small sip of the cool water. She closed her eyes as it slipped down her throat, soothing the ragged edges her sobs had left behind.

“Oh, Marilla. Everything is such a disaster,” she said miserably, setting the cup down on the floorboards beside her. She wiped at her face with the back of her hand.

The concerned tension in Marilla’s brow relaxed slightly. She had heard similar words come from Anne numerous times before over the years that she had known her, and whatever predicament vexing her at the time had never been remotely near as terrible as she made it out to be.

“Come now Anne, I’m sure whatever has happened cannot be as bad as that,” she said with confidence.

“No, you don’t understand.” Anne’s words were thick with the remnants of tears. “He’s gone and spoiled everything.” She shuddered with another sob. The Cuthbert siblings exchanged quizzical looks.

“Who, dear?” Marilla prompted, tenderly brushing aside the strands of red that had become plastered to Anne’s cheeks.
“Gil- Gilbert.” Anne’s voice hitched on his name. She peered up at Marilla despondently.

“Gilbert Blythe?” Marilla said, astonished. She had always thought rather highly of the boy and was in staunch disbelief that he was somehow behind her daughter’s anguish.

Anne nodded as she sniffled. She dragged a deep breath into her lungs, suddenly feeling parched for air and a tad lightheaded. Marilla and Matthew continued to stare at her in confusion.

“He’s… He’s proposed.”

Matthew clutched his chest as the shock washed over him. Marilla froze beside Anne, gaping at her. Anne thought that she could have knocked her clean over with the slightest touch of her little finger. After a few moments, Marilla recovered herself enough to speak.

“So, you have… refused him?” she ventured tentatively, unable to read the emotions playing across Anne features.

Anne’s brows knit together as she reconsidered her words. “Well, no, not exactly.” The sharp look of astonishment that appeared on Marilla’s face prompted her to clarify. “He didn’t quite propose, but I am sure that he meant to. I, I stopped him before he could ask me, formally.”

“Do you not care for him?” Marilla had always suspected that Anne carried at least a small affection for John Blythe’s son with her.

“Marilla,” Anne said, evading the question. “It doesn’t matter how I feel, for I am a child yet. Even if I were not too young to wed, I know for certain that I am not ready to be a wife.” She uttered the last word with a vehemence that took Marilla by surprise. “Gil- He fancies himself grown because he has traveled and seen the limitlessness of this world, as I long to do one day. I cannot possibly do those things, nor can I accomplish my vocational goals if I’m restricted to being a, a housewife.” She spit the word again, before a renewed bought of sobs overtook her slight frame.

Anne leaned into Marilla beside her as the front door banged open. Jerry quickly took in the scene playing out on the living room floor as he entered from the foyer. A dark shadow fell over his face as he absorbed Anne’s apparent distress, his shoulders shifting back instinctively.

“What did he do?” Jerry growled as he looked between the Cuthberts for an explanation. His fists clenched at his sides as Anne’s tear-streaked face lifted to meet his hard gaze.

Matthew jumped up from the seat he had taken on a small oak chair in the corner of the room, moving towards the farmhand with an arm outstretched, gesturing that he ought to return outside. Nodding awkwardly, he merely mumbled “Barn,” as he caught the young man’s elbow on his way out of the room.

When the two men were gone, Anne broached the fear that had been nagging at her thoughts since she had stepped out of the orchard. She turned to Marilla, her fingers curling in her grip.

“Do you think I have spoiled my only chance?” She whispered, tears pricking at her eyes. “Do you think another man will ever have me?” Her lip quivered as she searched her mother’s face for her honest belief.

Marilla chuckled softly, bringing her hands to either side of Anne’s face, framing it in her wizened fingers. “Anne Shirley-Cuthbert, you are young and have so much of life still ahead of you. Don’t get ahead of yourself with worry.”

She smiled tenderly at Anne, who nodded, comforted by the certainty in Marilla’s voice.
Friends New and Old

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anne’s fingertips fell lightly on the desk, drumming evenly against the polished wood. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth as she frowned at the slate in front of her. No matter which way she thought about it, the triangle could not be solved. Miss Stacey must’ve made a mistake, provided a wrong value, Anne concluded.

She looked up from her slate to determine if any of her peers recognized the error as well. Ruby’s blonde head was bent over her work in the seat directly in front of Anne, a studious Jane working swiftly beside her, the chalk squealing against the board on her desk. Anne winced at the sound.

Shifting back on the bench, Anne snuck a side glance at Diana’s slate beside her. The raven-haired girl caught her eye, the blush of embarrassment at being caught peeking at her friend’s work quickly being replaced with amusement as she registered Diana’s equally confused face. Her dainty brows tepee-d in a silent plea for help. Anne shrugged in reply, the corner of her mouth turning down in dissatisfaction.

Ruby shifted in front of them, leaning forward to rest her elbow on the desk and prop her head up with her small fist against her cheek. Her movement revealed the upper corner of her slate, and Anne craned her neck eagerly to make out her work.

But Ruby hadn’t been working on the problem at all. As she squinted at the girl’s slate, Anne made out the shape of a heart rather than a triangle.Nested inside were the initials ‘RG + GB’ printed in bold strokes of chalk. Ruby sighed, her eyes unfocused as she gazed at the far wall of the classroom, clearly in the throes of a daydream.

Anne groaned inwardly as she slumped back in her seat. Her stomach clenching, she began to come to terms with the impending embarrassment of being unable to complete the problem. If Miss Stacey selected her to show her work on the chalkboard in the front of the room, Anne didn’t think she’d be able to live down the humiliation. She gulped, her brows furrowing, as she wrung her hands in her lap. Her palms were becoming slick as her heart rate picked up. She stole a glimpse at the clock, watching despondently as the thin hand ticked by the seconds.

A movement on the periphery of her vision drew her attention. Across the aisle, Charlie Sloane was inching his slate to the left side of his desk, in her direction. His eyes remained forward, locked on Miss Stacey as she paced at the front of the room. As she turned, lifting a hand to the chalkboard to begin recreating the diagram of the problem, he glanced at Anne, meeting her confused gaze.

Shooting another cautious glimpse at Miss Stacey’s back, he tipped his slate in Anne’s direction, revealing his completed work for the problem. Without missing a heartbeat, Anne scanned the chalk marks, quickly recognizing where her folly had been.

Turning to her own slate, she made the necessary adjustments and completed the problem with ease. As Miss Stacey turned to face the class, Anne flashed Charlie a grateful smile. He nodded slightly, returning her grin with a shy smile of his own.

“What do you know about Charlie?” Anne asked Diana as the two walked the forested path away
from the schoolhouse later that afternoon. Though she hadn’t really thought on it before, Anne realized that the lanky boy’s kindness during the geometry lesson was not an isolated occurrence. She had never known him to say a bad word against her, even when she had first arrived in Avonlea to unceremonious detestation by most of the small town’s residents.

Diana hesitated, flipping through her mind for all that she knew about the boy, which she discovered was surprisingly little. “Um, I don’t know much about him,” she confessed. “He has always been rather quiet, and I think as far as friends go, at present he is closest with Moody.”

Anne nodded, head bowed to watch her step through the sodden undergrowth. It had been some weeks since they had returned to school, and the snow lingering on the earth was melting more with each passing day. Damp spots blossomed on the toes of their boots as they trudged through the wet grass.

“Of course, Charlie used to be closest with Gil- someone else.” Diana caught herself. She had tried, with immense difficulty, to avoid the topic of their former curly-haired classmate since the winter holiday on account of Anne’s complete silence in his regard. Diana couldn’t be sure what had transpired between them, and it took all of her resolve not to shower her bosom friend in the endless curiosities pulling at her mind.

“I didn’t know he and Gilbert were friends,” Anne replied with mild interest, his name leaving her mouth with a nonchalance that surprised both of them. Diana’s shoulders relaxed beside the redhead as her unwritten rule was rendered void.

She allowed a few moments of silence to stretch between them before Diana could bear it no longer, her curiosity over-taking her sensibility.

“Did something happen between you two when he was home?” she blurted, unable to keep her tone casual. Failing to see the pain twisting into her friend’s lips, Diana barreled on. “It’s just that I would have supposed you were happy to see him, but you haven’t spoken of him once since he came and left.”

Anne’s careful watch on the uneven ground under her feet shifted out of focus as Gilbert’s broken expression floated into her field of vision. It’s all in your head. The lie hissed through her teeth, shattering him before her. Her chest clenched at the memory, as if Gilbert himself had wrapped his long fingers around her heart and squeezed.

“I don’t think Gilbert wants to be friends anymore,” Anne said vaguely, hoping Diana couldn’t hear how she almost choked on the words.

Diana narrowed her eyes at her, suspecting that Anne was excluding some crucial details. Anne didn’t wish to lie to her friend. In fact, she knew that she could not. But, until much more time had passed, she was satisfied in walking the thin line between telling Diana the truth and committing a lie by omission. Besides, what she had said to Diana was technically true; Gilbert had indeed told her that he didn’t want to be friends with her any longer, though if Diana had been privy to the context in which he had made that admission, her face would be much less sober than it was now. Anne would have found this situation much more humorous had the gravity of it been less, but in truth she doubted whether he would ever come near her again after the hurt she had caused him, a thought which pained her greatly.

“Why ever not?” Diana asked, appalled. “You two seemed so close before he left for school!”

Anne swallowed, setting her jaw. “People drift apart.”
Diana looked taken aback. After a few heartbeats, she softened, regret creeping into the slant of her brow. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much lately, Anne,” she whispered.

Anne’s face pinched as she looked at her bosom friend in confusion. “Oh, Diana. It wasn’t my meaning to implicate you. We both have become quite busied with our pursuits, haven’t we? Nevertheless, I know we shall be bosom friends no matter where life takes us! Not to worry!” She took Diana’s delicate hand in her own calloused one, giving it a comforting squeeze.

A smile broke across Diana’s face, dispelling the fervent apology on her lips. Reassured, she tightened her fingers around Anne’s as they continued down the path.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the slowdown of updates; my other commitments have increased a bunch, so I’m having less time and energy to write. Thanks for reading as always, and let me know what you think of the story so far!
Neutral Tones

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back?? I'm so sorry for the long hiatus, but I am back now, and eager to get back into this story. Stay tuned for more frequent updates (hopefully, fingers crossed) and let me know what you think so far! As always, thanks for reading!

Having split from Diana’s company at the fork in the path between their two properties, Anne had hugged her friend closely, planting a kiss on each rosy cheek, then continued on her way towards Green Gables. As she ambled along, Anne tilted her face upwards, allowing the distant sun to brush a feeble ray of warmth across her features. The corners of her eyes crinkled as she spotted the first buds of spring on the barren branches above, speckling the narrow limbs with a verdant hue.

Anne sighed contentedly, the fresh air chasing all thoughts contrary to the splendor of the day to the back of her mind. As she walked, she kept an ear tilted towards the wood, listening for the sweet sound of songbirds in the air. She hummed along, feeling lighter than she had in weeks.

Soon the whitewashed fence of Green Gables came into view. Within it, the figure of an older man was grooming a work horse, his arm passing back and forth over its honey-colored coat. Anne raised her arm in greeting and the older man paused in his task, returning her wave with a genuine smile.

“Hello, Matthew!” Anne chirped as she lifted the latch on the fence gate, letting herself onto the property. She shifted the belt hanging over her right shoulder to the other as she approached him, weariness from her walk taking claim on her body now that she had slowed.

Matthew tipped his hat to her, the smile on his face unwavering as he looked affectionately on the redhead.

“Hello, Belle.” Anne patted the patch of white on the horse’s muzzle. “You must be enjoying this beautiful day,” she said, inclining her head towards the animal. Belle merely blinked lazily as Anne diverted her gaze to Matthew who nodded in agreement with her statement upon meeting her eyes. Anne smiled at him tenderly.

In lieu of a spoken goodbye, she rested her small hand against his upper arm, squeezing slightly as she passed him to enter the barn. Anne heard the rough sound of renewed brushing behind her as she slid open the weathered door with a heave.

Once inside, she abandoned her bundle of school texts on the workbench, sliding the top volume out from under the leather belt strap. Tucking it securely under her arm, Anne moved to climb the rungs to the hayloft, where she was sure to find her attentive pupil.

A broad smile appeared on Jerry’s face as he watched the copper roots of Anne’s hair peek out of the gap in the floorboards. Gently, he set the wheelbarrow he had been supporting down, then moved to offer a hand to the young woman ascending into the loft. She took it gratefully, for it was difficult to climb the ladder whilst maintaining hold of the book under her arm.

“How was school?” Jerry asked as Anne gained her footing upon reaching the top of the ladder.
“It was… interesting,” she said, as she recalled Charlie’s unexpected help. The corner of her mouth pulled up infinitesimally.

Jerry let the pause between them grow as he waited for her to inquire after his own day, but when it was apparent that she would not, he clapped his hands together, the sound reverberating through the silence. Anne seemed to jolt from a reverie, blinking rapidly before refocusing her attention on the farmhand before her. She raised the volume in her hands, holding it out for him to take.

Jerry took it gingerly, aware of the grime on his fingers against the flawless sheen of the apricot cover. Gold script gleamed up at him, swirling in an elegant font that made it impossible to read. He raised his head to look at Anne for an explanation.

“It’s a new book of poems,” Anne said, catching the confused curve of his brow. “Miss Stacey gave it to me today after class. She thought I would find it most romantical,” she effused, a slight blush tinting her cheeks.

“What does this say?” Jerry asked, running his thumb over the metallic lettering.

“Oh, Wessex Poems by Tom Hardy!” She chirped, her shoulder bumping against his as she came to stand beside him. “I thought we could continue practicing your reading from this. You’re getting quite good, so I think you can handle it.”

Jerry’s ears reddened as he smiled at her compliment, his chest swelling a bit with pride. Soon after classes had resumed, Anne had begun to stop by the barn after school to help Jerry with his reading, her visits increasing in frequency as the snow melted. Now, she appeared in the hayloft most every day, a book or some other reading material tucked under her arm.

Jerry nodded, crouching to nestle himself into his usual spot in the hay pile directly under the barn window, sunlight spilling over the book in his hands and throwing splashes of gold on the underside of his chin. Anne settled herself beside him, legs crossed in a manner of which Marilla would never approve. Jerry cracked the spine, opening the book to a random page and balancing it between their knees.

“We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
- They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.”

Anne nodded in encouragement, not taking her eyes from the page as he glanced up her. Jerry ran his tongue lightly over his upper lip before continuing.

“Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove
Over tedious riddles of years ago;
And some words played between us to and fro
On which lost the more by our love.”

She tightened beside him, her eyes darkening as they skimmed ahead of his halting pace. As he spoke each word, chewing on the pronunciation, Anne felt herself slip from the warm comfort of the loft into the snapping chill of an orchard in wintertime.

“The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
Alive enough to have strength to die;
And a grin of bitterness swept thereby
Like an ominous bird a-wing....”
Chocolate eyes looked at her from beneath thick lashes, unfeeling and unseeing. She reached out to
him, expecting her fingers to spark against the smooth skin of his cheek, but instead falling against
empty air. Anne let her hand fall back to her side as the figure before her shifted. She blinked, and
her own cerulean gaze accused her through narrowed eyes.

“Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God curst dun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.”

Finishing the poem, Jerry looked up at the redhead beside him once more, a triumphant smile gracing
his features. His grin faltered as he caught the distance in her gaze, her eyes fixated on the page over
her knee, but her mind clearly elsewhere. He leaned into her, the flesh of his upper arm yielding
against her bony shoulder. Her lashes fluttered, the anxiety of her thoughts snaking back behind her
eyes and loosening its grip on her jaw as she refocused on her surroundings. With a small shake of
her head, she returned to his side.

“Wonderful, Jerry!” she praised him, the tone of her voice bright and forced.

He scanned her face for a moment, contemplating whether or not to ask of what she had been
thinking. But she smiled, pride warming her features where the worry had just been, so he forged
ahead with the lesson, abandoning his curiosity.

His eyes ran back over the phrases of the poem. Having just read it aloud, he ought to know what
had transpired over the lines of text, but the words were as unfamiliar as they had been when he first
turned to the page. His lips twisted in dissatisfaction, his brows furrowing.

“What… what does it mean?” he asked tentatively, embarrassment coloring his cheeks as he kept his
gaze firm on the letters of the poem, unwilling to meet Anne’s critical eye.

When a scathing remark did not immediately come, he glanced at her. She was folded beside him,
her shoulders hunching forward slightly as she dug a fingernail under the nail of her thumb,
dislodging the black dirt caked there.

“It’s about two lovers who meet at the side of this pond,” she began quietly, not lifting her eyes, but
gesturing to the page between them. “They meet after some time has passed, and they are…
considering the truth of their relationship, whether it can be saved. Whether there is anything to
save.” A shaky breath slid through her teeth as Jerry stared at her, eyes softening. “In the end, he
realizes that love can be deceiving. It was all a lie.”

Her words hung in the air, the weight of them not lost on the farmhand beside her. He studied her
face, watching the dilation of her pupils as her gaze left the hayloft once more.

“Anne, *merci* for the lesson today, but I ought to get going,” he said finally, pushing the book into
her lap and easing himself up from the floorboards.

She nodded, her gaze lingering absently on the wheelbarrow resting in front of her. Jerry ran his
hands over the legs of his pants, swatting at the clinging strands of straw.

“Are you going to be alright?” he asked, uneasy about leaving her in this state. He stuffed his hands
in his pockets, ducking his head so that she might not see the extent of his concern.

She nodded again. “I think I might stay up here for a bit.” Anne gave him a weak smile, her fingers
twisting in a stray strand of hair beneath her ear.
Jerry eyed her, catching the wobble in her bottom lip as she turned her attention back to the piece of hay she was stripping apart in her fingers. Matthew had refused to tell him exactly what had happened, but Jerry had overheard enough to come to suspect Gilbert of having had a hand in the downturn of Anne’s spirits. His jaw clenched as he recalled the pain in her usually playful eyes when she had looked up at him from between Marilla’s arms.

Jerry sucked in a breath to calm the simmering that had stirred up in his blood. He nodded at Anne, then turned away from her. As he eased himself down the ladder, he mumbled an *au revoir* that rose muted into the loft above him.

Anne waited until she heard the audible thud of the barn door closing behind him to let a tear fall.

Chapter End Notes

You can find the text of the poem Neutral Tones by Thomas Hardy here: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50364/neutral-tones
As the last of the winter snow melted into the earth and the verdant tips of daffodils began to erupt from the mud, it was as if the nascent spring was breathing new life into Anne. Indeed, she had quickly found it next to impossible to remain in poor spirits as the air warmed outside, beckoning her to move her study sessions out of doors. She had spent many months meticulously preparing for her college entrance exams, but welcomed the distraction of pouring over her books nonetheless, becoming enthralled in the details of Canadian history and Shakespearean sonnets.

It was only after emerging from the schoolhouse, having sat for her exams for the past several hours, that her mind was so empty for the first time in weeks as to allow the thought of Gilbert to filter into her consciousness. She had wanted to share her relief over having completed this scholastic milestone with him, the knot in her stomach only having a moment to twist before Diana burst through the schoolhouse door behind her, enveloping her in her arms. A grin of pure liberation had graced her divine face, the sight of which immediately quelled the turn of Anne’s stomach and brought a smile to her own countenance.

With her examinations behind her, Anne had been free to turn her attention to the approaching romantic holiday. Though she had no valentine of her own to speak of, her excitement for the day only grew as she found herself caught up in the speculations of her girlfriends. Of course, they all knew that Fred would make a most grand and romantic gesture for the lovely Diana. Jane had a keen eye on Charlie, hoping that he might see the holiday as the perfect opportunity to confess to her, while Tillie was most looking forward to the strawberry tarts Anne had promised to bring for the occasion. Ruby, bless her, had made a habit of meeting Edmund at the end of her drive each morning before school, eagerly sifting through the post he handed her for a letter addressed from Kingsport.

When the holiday finally arrived, the girls snickered together through the entirety of the morning lesson, much to Miss Stacey’s dismay. Springing from the benches the moment she dismissed them for lunch, they scuttled to the far corner of the classroom, eager smiles adorning their faces.

“Did you bring them?” Tillie prompted Anne as soon as the redhead had seated herself on the floor beside Diana.

“Of course, ye of little faith!” Anne chided the brunette playfully, bringing a second basket from behind her and placing it in the circle between them. She grinned as she slowly folded back the cloth obscuring the desserts, her friends leaning forward in anticipation. As the gleam of the glaze appeared, they all sighed in awe.

“They look scrumptious, Anne!” Diana complimented her, smoothing out her handkerchief on the floorboards by her knees. Anne smiled as she recognized the delicate embroidery done by her own hand, having spent many hours in the prior week hunched over the needlepoint. Though somewhat grotesque in appearance, the pair of cherubs she had stitched into the pale fabric were still recognizable, and she had been proud to present the gift to Diana on their walk to the schoolhouse that morning.

With the greatest care, Anne plucked a tart from the basket, placing it on the handkerchief in front of Diana. As she passed the tarts to the other girls, Ruby squealed with excitement.

“Oh, I must tell you all something! I can hardly contain it any longer!” she cried, ignoring the sweet Anne had placed in front of her. “I have been ever so bold.”

Tillie raised her eyebrows, shortbread crumbs clinging to her lips. Jane leaned forward, intrigued.
“Go on,” she coaxed. A blush rose in Ruby’s soft cheeks.

“I sent Gilbert a valentine!” The words rushed out of her, as if a dam had broken. “I realized that it might have slipped his mind to send one to me, seeing as he must be so busy with his studies. He is ever so studious, as you girls know. Anyway, I remembered what Anne said a few years ago, about how the girl ought not to wait for the boy, and I thought why not!” Ruby thrust her pointed chin higher into the air as the girls gaped at her, her small frame trembling with pride.

Jane was the first to trade her shock for words.

“My, Ruby, I cannot believe you did a thing like that!” she said, astonishment oozing from her voice. Tillie nodded beside her, eyes wide.

During this exchange, Diana slid a glance at Anne. Intending to survey her bosom friend for any hint of dismay at Ruby’s disclosure, Diana instead watched as Anne brought a hand up to her chin, catching the dollop of custard that had dribbled down her chin in her shock. Reacting quickly, Diana offered Anne a spare kerchief and a consoling smile, both of which the redhead gratefully accepted.

As she wiped the tart filling from her chin, Anne caught the wobble in Ruby’s demeanor as their friends shed doubt on her audacious romantic tactic. Sympathy for the infatuated girl sprouted up inside Anne. After all, Ruby had been following her own logic, and for that she could not fault her.

“I think what you did was quite brave,” Anne said kindly, setting the soiled kerchief down beside her knee. She lifted her lashes to look at the pretty girl across from her, finding herself warmed by the gratitude in her gaze as their eyes met.

“Thank you, Anne,” Ruby spluttered, a touch of indignation coloring her tone as she shot a glare back to Tillie and Jane. The pair shrunk back, lowering their eyes to their lunches.

A few heartbeats passed in uncomfortable silence before a shadow fell over the circle of girls, drawing their gazes upward to the two figures approaching them.

“Uh… hello,” Charlie greeted them hesitantly, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand, the other tucked behind his back. Moody stood beside him, dwarfed in the lanky boy’s presence.

The girls murmured a concurrent greeting in return, their furtive glances at one another not escaping the pair’s notice. Jane sat up straighter as Charlie took another step forward, bringing his arm from behind his back, revealing red paper clasped between his long fingers.

“Anne,” he said, his brown eyes falling on the redhead seated to his left. “This is for you.” He handed her a small card made of heavy crimson cardstock. It gleamed as she took it from his shaky fingers, the script of the sentiment bold against the glossy sheen. Be Mine, Valentine. She turned it over in her palm, her eyes running over the stamp of the printer’s shop where he had purchased it. Evidently, he had gone all the way to Charlottetown.

Anne’s cheeks flushed as she looked back up at him, his eyes bright, but more guarded than usual.

“Thank you, Charlie. This was sweet of you.” She smiled at him, genuinely touched that he had thought of her.

The deliberate brush of Diana’s elbow against her arm brought Anne’s attention back to the circle, her gaze landing on Jane’s pinched face. Before Anne could speak to assuage her growing envy, Charlie cut in.

“I have one for you too, Jane.” His arm shot forward, extending an almost identical card to the one
he had given Anne towards her. Jane’s features smoothed, her smile sickeningly sweet as she accepted the valentine with grace.

“For me? Charlie, you shouldn’t have.” She batted her eyelashes up at him, a shy grin breaking across his features as she did so. He rubbed his neck again as Anne stifled a laugh at the gag Diana was miming beside her.

After the polite exchange of a few more pleasantries, the boys turned their backs on the circle of girls, disappearing out of the schoolhouse door to rejoin the other boys outside. The group collapsed in a fit of giggles as soon as they were out of earshot.

As they fought for breath, Ruby waved a hand in Diana’s direction, her other wrapped around her torso as her chest heaved with laughter. “Diana, show us the valentine you received from Fred again!” she implored the raven-haired girl, her own grey eyes sparkling.

An embarrassed smile split across her features as Diana acquiesced to her friend’s appeal, pulling the card from beneath her school books. It was printed, much the same as the one Charlie had given Anne, but nearly twice the size and embellished with lace doily and foil hearts. A renewed round of giggles and hushed awe erupted from the group.

“You are so lucky to have a beau, Diana!” Ruby gushed, her eyes raking over the gaudy valentine. The flush in Diana’s pale cheeks deepened as the other girls nodded in agreement.

Anne chuckled at her bosom friend, whom she knew disliked being the object of everyone’s attentions despite her tendency to draw every eye in any room she entered. Catching her embarrassed glance, Anne laid her hand gently on the girl’s arm, smiling in earnest.

“Ruby is right, Diana. You really are fortunate, and I am glad for you! You deserve someone as wonderful as you.” Anne’s eyes sparkled as Diana clutched the freckled hand on her arm. She looked on Anne steadily, her dark eyes affectionate.

“As do you, Anne,” Diana replied, her gaze sharpening into a pointed look. The redhead shook her head at the suggestion in her words as the bell rang, ending the lunch period.

Jerry wiped his brow as the familiar sound of boot soles clambering up the ladder echoed through the hayloft later that afternoon. He ambled over to the opening in the floorboards, extending his palm to the redhead, who clasped it gratefully. Rocking back on his heels, Jerry lifted her into the loft with a fluid motion.

Anne smiled at the farmhand animatedly as she smoothed her skirts and swatted flyaway hairs from her eyes. A book was secured in the crook of her arm. Jerry recognized it as the poetry book they had been reading from for weeks now, the apricot cover had become worn with the frequent use.

He reached for the volume under her arm, but Anne rocked away from his grasp, giving him a small shake of her head. His brows buckled in confusion as he watched a smile spread on her face.

“Actually,” Anne said slowly, taking the book from its place beside her elbow, “I want you to keep it from now on.” She smiled broadly now, extending the book to him with both hands, the bottom edge of the cover sinking slightly into the fabric of his shirt.

He looked at her quizzically, his hands tentatively raising to take the volume from her hands.

“Are you sure?”
She nodded, adamant. “It’s a gift,” she said simply, dropping her arms to her side, leaving the book in his hands.

“Thank you,” he said, disbelief still evident in the inflection of his voice. He smiled back at her, the skin around his eyes crinkling.

“You are very welcome,” Anne returned, clasping her hands together behind her as she swayed happily.

His eyes widened as he remembered something, quickly turning to rummage a hand through the back pocket of his trousers. Anne stifled a laugh as he produced a rumpled piece of paper from therein. He presented it to her sheepishly.

Anne took it in her hand, smoothing the creases in the dusty rose parchment. *Happy Valentine’s Day Anne* was written in neat cursive, though sloping slightly to the left as it crossed the page. Pride swelled in Anne’s chest as she looked back up at him.

“Thank you, Jerry! You even spelled my name right this time,” she said with a laugh. His face hardly had time to register the apparent surprise at her comment as she threw her arms around him.

“Why didn’t you tell me I was spelling it wrong?” he asked, his voice muffled against her copper hair.

He felt the breath of her laugh against his neck, but she didn’t respond as she squeezed him tighter, her heart fuller than she could recall it ever having been before.
The Dying Light of February

Anne hummed as she entered the kitchen, unwinding the scarf from around her neck and letting the heavy oak door fall closed behind her, the deadbolt cracking loudly as it fell against the frame. Tossing the scarf over a hook hung on the adjacent wall, she kicked off her muddy boots and shrugged the light coat from her shoulders.

Marilla’s warm voice called out from the pantry. “Anne? Is that you?” Anne heard the familiar clatter of glass against ceramic as the woman searched the tightly packed shelves.

“Yes, Marilla,” Anne replied, following the clinking across the kitchen and into the small storeroom. The older woman’s eyes were narrowed into slits as she bent to squint at the fading labels in front of her. A quick glance at the other jars already collected in her arms suggested that stew was on the menu tonight.

“How was school today?” Marilla asked, not looking at the redhead as her fingers danced in the air over the shelf, failing to find what they were looking for.

“It was fine, much the same as usual,” Anne said, plucking a small jar of peppercorns from the back corner of the shelf and settling it in Marilla’s palm. She hmphed and regarded Anne with a keen eye as she wrapped her fingers around it and shuffled from the pantry.

“And you are not having a lesson with Jerry then?” Marilla presumed, as she set the items down on the table. She had gotten used to preparing supper alone as Anne had become accustomed to spending the late afternoon hours aiding the boy in his literacy.

Anne shook her head. “Matthew was in need of him today, I reckon to sow the fields.” She moved towards the basin, rolling back the sleeves of her dress before running her hands over with soap and water.

Marilla set aside a handful of potatoes and a paring knife for Anne as the younger woman settled the apron around her neck, tying the straps neatly into a bow. Anne needed no further direction from Marilla as the two fell into the comfortable rhythm of working across the kitchen table from the other. The hum in Anne’s throat resumed as she set to work on the potatoes, gouging the knots and eyes from the starchy tubers.

“Still no word on the results of your exams?” Marilla asked with feigned indifference, breaking the lift of Anne’s tune.

Anne shook her head as she tossed scraps into the slop bucket beside her.

“No, but I expect we might hear within a week’s time,” she said, hopefulness and anticipation evident in her tone.

The older woman nodded in understanding, resigned to this answer. In truth, Marilla thought herself rather more concerned over the results than even Anne herself, as she had come to so ardently desire Anne’s college attendance. Though she would never say so to her, of course, in fear of putting increased expectation on the poor girl, Marilla sincerely hoped that she might have the opportunities in life that she herself had never had.

Before Anne could notice the intensity of the thoughts turning over in her mind, Marilla changed the subject of conversation.
“Do you need anything from town? Rachel and I thought we might go tomorrow morning to pick up a few necessities.”

Anne chewed her lip, the cracked skin moistening against her tongue. After a few moments, nothing specific coming to mind, she replied.

“I have everything I could want, Marilla.” She smiled at the older woman, her words earnest, as the knife in her hand paused to hover over the potato she was in the midst of slicing.

Marilla met her sapphire eyes with a tender gaze and a chuckle, waving off the gravity of Anne’s proclamation with a compromising mumble before returning her attention to the pile of beans before her.

Having just finished dicing one, Anne shuffled a fresh potato onto the cutting board in front of her. With a precision unnecessary to the task at hand, she steadied the blade of the knife over the center, the fingertips of her free hand keeping the tuber from slipping against the slick wood of the board. She sliced downward in one clean stroke, satisfaction breaking across her features.

The pair of women continued on this way, falling again into a comfortable silence as the soft bubbling of broth and the rhythmic chopping of Anne’s knife filled the kitchen with a tune all its own.

Anne had just begun slicing into the last of the potatoes when the crash of a door being flung open startled her, the sharp blade slipping in her hand and gouging into the skin between her thumb and index. She cursed as pain seared through her hand, but her attention was pulled away by the pale face of the farmhand who had rushed into the kitchen.

“It’s Mr. Cuthbert! Something’s happened to, to his heart!”

Anne locked wide eyes with Jerry, the panic rising in her veins already coursing through his own, rendering his breaths strained and uneven. Fear washed over her as the gravity of the situation settled in her mind, and she felt her knees weaken. Anne gripped the edge of the table she had been working at contently only moments prior, blood from the wound on her hand smearing onto the surface.

Shudders ran through her small frame as she watched Marilla throw on her coat and move towards the door, abandoning the half-prepared stew on the stove.

“Jerry, fetch the doctor at once. Ride as fast as you can!” she instructed, the calmness in her voice betrayed by the fear swirling in her grey eyes.

Collecting himself, Jerry bolted out the door through which he had come in, Anne and Marilla trailing close behind him.

A red stain blossomed where Anne’s shaking hands knotted in the fabric of her apron.
Gilbert squinted at the sun filtering through the grey clouds collecting in the sky overhead, the light spotting his vision as he exited the hall. Stepping down from the stoop, a brisk wind rushed through his dark curls, pinching his cheeks and sending a shiver through his frame. Huffing, he brought his right hand from where it was stuffed inside his coat pocket. Biting a fingertip, he pulled the glove from his hand, leaving his fingers free to fasten the topmost button of his overcoat. The late February air chaffed against his bare skin as he pushed the chilled clasp through the loop of fabric.

Another shiver ran the course of Gilbert’s spine as a fresh gust of wind hurried past him. Gritting his teeth against the cold air, he pulled his glove back over his bare fingers and drew his scarf up over his reddening nose. Eyes fixed to the brick-paved lane, curls stirring over his forehead, Gilbert set off for home.

Though he had been back at Redmond for some weeks now, the bite in the air still refused to abate, despite the presence of pale buds signaling the beginning of spring emerging on the trees along the road. He was impatient for the warmth of the new season to arrive, hoping that it would bring along with it a host of distractions from the redheaded woman haunting his mind.

Gilbert had allowed himself to mourn the loss of a future with her limpid blue eyes in it for the duration of the journey back to Kingsport, refusing to let her rejection disable him completely. And so, the raw heart that had boarded the train in Avonlea arrived at the Kingsport station coated in steel. Determined to move forward, he poured himself into his studies, encouraged to find that long nights among the stacks in the library offered the best distraction from, if not also the best solace for, the cold ache in his chest.

But, inevitably, each night he returned home to lay awake and watch candlelight dance across the ceiling, the glow of the impassioned flame in some way both familiar and comforting.

On this Friday afternoon, his warm breath hung in the wool cloth over his mouth as it slid through his clenched teeth, but the chill in the air did little to dampen his spirits. Unmatched relief had spilled over him as he put down the pen on the anatomy examination for which he had just studied the last fortnight. He grinned into his scarf as he thought on it. He knew he had done well, and now, with the examination behind him, he finally allowed himself to consider the weekend ahead and all its possibilities.

Gilbert turned down a side street, shoulders squared against the bitter wind, eyes beginning to water in protest. Lifting his eyes from the pavement to wipe at them, a familiar head of glossy raven hair caught his attention. He slowed his pace as she approached him, stopping when they met each other on the sidewalk.

Dark indigo eyes met his with obvious pleasure.

“Gilbert!” she greeted him, her gloved hand falling lightly against his arm. She smiled up at him, the skin around her eyes crinkling and obscuring the deep sapphire that ringed her irises.

“Christine. Good to see you,” he replied with equal warmth, returning her wide smile.

“Are we still on for the boating party this Sunday?” Christine asked, her tone bright and unflinching, indicating an unwavering confidence in his confirmative answer.

“Yes, of course,” Gilbert assured her, realizing that he actually was looking forward to the outing in
question. Christine had invited him some days before, when his thoughts were still focused on his impending examination, but now he could commit all his attention to building new relationships in Kingsport.

He smiled down at her, his gaze running over her ivory cheeks and dark brows. Her nose was strong and straight, leading to the delicate curve of her lips, reddened and cracked from the cold. Her features were framed gracefully in her heart-shaped face, her long hair coming loose from its arrangement in the gusting wind.

She was beautiful, no question.

“Lovely!” She squeezed his arm where her fingers still laid, flashing him another winning smile. Her gaze lingered on him for a few moments, and Gilbert felt a pinkness come into his cheeks that had nothing to do with the cold air.

“Well, I must be on my way,” she said finally, dropping her hand from his arm. Gilbert stepped away from her, watching as she continued down the road the way he had come, her skirts whipping around her legs in the gusting breeze. Teeth gnawing on the inside of his cheek, Gilbert returned his scarf to its original place over his nose before he too continued on his way.

He hardly noticed as his feet carried him the remaining blocks to his dormitory building, so consuming were his thoughts. He felt as if Christine’s lingering gaze was following him up the two flights of stairs and down the hall to his door. Having fished his key from the depths of his coat pocket, he moved to enter it into the lock, only to drop it with a metallic clang against the stone floor when he recognized the unnerving similarity between two sets of sapphire eyes.

He sighed as the redhead flooded his mind, her image searing the space over his heart. He bent to pluck the key from the floor, fingers curling around the cold metal. He raised it again to the slot on the worn doorknob, sliding the key into the lock.

Gilbert leaned his shoulder against the door as the lock clicked open.

“Afternoon, Gil.”

A young man with sandy hair looked up briefly from the armchair where he sat, a book open in his hands. Though it was hard to discern while he was seated, he had a stocky build and broad shoulders that quarreled with the softness of his hazel eyes and the youthful curve of his cheeks.

“Good afternoon, William,” Gilbert greeted his roommate as he moved into the small apartment, shucking his overcoat and laying it over the back of a nearby chair.

“How did it go?” William enquired, placing a triangle of parchment against the open page of his book and shutting it softly. For a moment Gilbert’s brow puckered in confusion as his mind labored to shove Anne from the forefront of his thoughts, allowing his memory to flit through the events of the afternoon.

“Oh, the exam. It went well, I believe,” he replied, catching up to the subject of William’s query.

“That’s good to hear.”

Silence fell around the room as Gilbert took a seat at his desk, failing to notice the eagerness which had brought his roommate to the edge of his own seat. William pressed his lips together as he waited for Gilbert to speak again and invite the subject plaguing his mind, but he stayed frustratingly quiet, his attention diverted to a volume that laid open on the desk in front of him.
“Have you spoken with Christine?” William finally prompted, unable to contain his curiosity for another moment. Gilbert raised a brow slightly, his eyes remaining fixed on the text before him.

“Oh, yes. I actually met her by coincidence on my way here,” he replied, sounding almost bored in his distraction.

“I think it not a coincidence, as she was here looking after you just a half hour ago.” William grinned as Gilbert blinked at this admission.

“Is that so?” he responded after a few moments passed, his features remaining even and smooth.

William groaned with exasperation. Lifting himself from the armchair and crossing the room, he took the book out from beneath Gilbert’s gaze, pressing the covers together and shoving it under an elbow. He gave Gilbert a pointed look.

“Gil, she’s a beautiful girl.”

Gilbert gave a slight nod in response, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. A brief glance at William’s expression convinced him that he could not meet his penetrating gaze, so Gilbert settled his eyes on the collar of William’s starched shirt.

“And she invited you to the boating party this Sunday,” William continued. Gilbert merely nodded again.

“Why are you not more excited?” William asked, exasperation coloring his question. He gaped at his clever friend, wondering when he had become so thick-headed.

Gilbert sighed, lifting his shoulders in a shrug. His eyelids fluttered as he lifted his golden eyes to meet his friend’s hazel ones, searching for an explanation for his lack of interest in their stunning peer which did not also divulge the reason for his staunch guard over his heart. Indeed, Christine was beautiful. He had accepted her invitation in the vain hope that he could grow to care for her, but the memory of flaming hair and wide sapphire eyes against a snow-white orchard was still too fresh in his mind.

“Perhaps it has to do with another,” William suggested, the corner of his mouth pulling up in a grin as Gilbert’s eyes snapped back to his roommate’s. They narrowed, trailing him to the small wooden table by the door where he lifted a small envelope that Gilbert had not noticed as he came in, reading the name from the top left-hand corner aloud.

“Anne Shirley-Cuthbert?” He turned back towards Gilbert. “This letter just came-”

Gilbert snatched the envelope from between his fingertips before William could finish, the wry grin on his features spreading ever wider as he recognized some truth in his playful suggestion.

“Must be quite the woman if just a letter from her has you in a tailspin,” William snickered, interest piqued by this unknown woman who evidently trumped even the beautiful Christine Stuart in his friend’s affections.

Gilbert did not respond for he did not hear him, too loud were the thoughts circling his mind as he read the return postage for himself. The letter was indeed from Anne, the delicate loops of Green Gables, Avonlea in as familiar a handwriting as his own. But for the life of him, he could not begin to guess why she had written.

She had made it clear to him that she did not return his affections, had she not? Perhaps she had changed her mind? He dared not hope. His teeth grated against the inside of his cheek as his fingers
shook against the parchment, fumbling against the sealed edge. The pounding of his heart crescendoed as a thousand possible reasons for her letter hurtled through his mind.

As he lifted the flap of the envelope, her face as he had last seen it rushed forward in his memory, eyes tight with anger, her pale visage dripping with betrayal. Freckles spilled across her porcelain cheeks, collecting on the bridge of her nose and in the space under her eyes, which shown cerulean within the frame of her copper hair. Despite her hatred, Gilbert’s stomach twisted with a sharp longing and he gasped aloud.

**Dear Gilbert,**

*I hope this letter finds you in good health. I myself write to you with the heaviest of hearts and the worst imaginable news. This Tuesday past, Matthew was taken ill following an episode involving his heart from which he did not recover. He passed Thursday morning in the company of family and soft rays of sunshine.*

*Though I recognize we did not part last on the greatest of terms, I feel that you alone of the persons in my acquaintance can understand the deep sorrow that has fallen over my life, having similarly lost a father so dear to your heart.*

*You’ll be comforted to know that your family has been most attentive in their care for Marilla and me in this hard time. Mary has spent very nearly every waking hour laboring in the Green Gables kitchen as Marilla attends to the funeral arrangements amidst her grief. As it is planting season, Bash has offered to aid Jerry in sowing the fields, but I fear he is burdened enough as it is carrying the sole responsibility for your own farm in your absence.*

*If you can find it within you to forgive my past trespasses, the funeral service is to be held on Sunday afternoon, following the regular church service. I understand if your desire to never see me again keeps you away, but I sincerely hope that you will return to Avonlea on dear Matthew’s account, for I know he always harbored an affinity for you.*

*Your friend,*

Anne Shirley-Cuthbert

It may have been minutes or perhaps hours that the world fell silent around Gilbert, save for the raggedness of his breathing as the weight of her grief settled in his heart. He read the letter over again, digesting the words now with a sobriety he hadn’t had before. His chest panged as he was reminded of his own father, fresh tears welling in the corners of his eyes as he thought of the pain Anne must be suffering through, having only just found a father in Mr. Cuthbert.

Gilbert looked over her words yet again, gripping the page now with both hands to keep it from shivering too much in his quaking palms. Reading line by line, still a more somber realization washed over him upon the third review. With Mr. Cuthbert gone, Green Gables was surely going to become compromised. Even with the aid of Bash and Jerry, the crop would likely never make it to harvest, and in that event, what would become of Anne?

Gilbert swallowed roughly as the image of her in his mind contorted, the sharp slant of her brows sagging with grief and her thin frame hunching in despair before disappearing from him altogether.

There was nothing else to do.

Before Gilbert could contemplate the consequences of his next actions, he staggered to his closet, pulling a small case from a shelf within. He threw open the latch and wrenched clothing from the drawers of his dresser, stuffing it into the open case. Turning to pull his overcoat from the chair, he
ran into William, who cushioned their collision with outstretched palms. Gilbert mumbled an apology as he moved around him, and though he watched his roommate’s lips move, his words were muffled beyond comprehension by the crashing of blood in his ears.

“I must return to Avonlea at once,” Gilbert said, tearing the letter from the desk where he had laid it down and shoving it roughly in his pocket. “I may not return for the remainder of the term. Please have my belongings shipped to me.” He thrust a fistful of silver coins into William’s hand.

“Has something happened to your family?” William stammered, confusion and concern lacing his words. He had never seen his friend in such a state.

“Indeed,” Gilbert said shortly, not wanting to sacrifice any more time to explanation.

Within moments, the door was slamming behind him and he was descending the stairs two at a time. His coat whipped around him as he broke once more into the chilly air of the late afternoon, snapping against his legs as he ran to the edge of the lane to hail a passing carriage.
Mourning

It seemed to Anne that Green Gables itself knew he was gone.

As Anne padded down the hall from her gabled bedroom, she peeked out of a window, her warm breath clouding the glass. Charcoal clouds choked out the morning sun, only a few rays of sunlight filtering through, washing the property in an immobilizing grey light. Anne was starting to believe that perhaps it had always been this way, though she remembered that the sun had been shining the day he left. Marilla had said that meant God was welcoming him home, and this had seemed to make her feel better.

But Anne knew no other home beside Green Gables, and now it was almost unrecognizable as that. The comfortable silence that used to fill the empty rooms of the house was deafening against her ears. She longed for the familiar reverberation of heavy footsteps through the floorboards, the creak of the old rocking chair in front of the fire. Without them, the house was too still, as if holding its breath while awaiting his return.

Though the walls of the house felt at times as if they were collapsing in on her, Anne almost preferred it to the numbness that had fallen over the rest of the property. With the usual clang of metal against metal no longer heralding her descent across the lawn in the mornings, the chickens seemed to be in a stupor, yielding their eggs to her without protest. Stopping by the stable afterwards, Anne felt the nudge of Belle’s nose against her shoulder more often too, her large eyes blinking slowly down at her.

Even the plants seemed to be in mourning.

Anne sighed as she descended the staircase and entered the kitchen. A glance at the grandfather clock in the sitting room told her it was nearing time for dinner, but the knot that had settled firmly in her stomach had rendered even the thought of eating nearly impossible over the past few days.

Instead, she lowered herself down onto the bench of the kitchen table, her body feeling suddenly much too heavy to be her own. Her head ached with exhaustion, and she struggled to keep it upright. At once she felt the overwhelming need to scream, to run as far as her legs would carry her and the numb emptiness that kept her frozen where she sat, unwilling and unable to do anything.

Her eyes pricked with the ghost of tears, having cried so much already that there were no more tears left to fall. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face upwards, her hands folding together in her lap.

Anne began to pray.

She only had the time to ask after Matthew and Marilla when the sound of the front door opening prompted her to pause in her prayers and open her eyes.

Her breath caught in her throat as her gaze fell on the visitor’s curly hair.

Gilbert stopped in the frame between the entryway and the kitchen where she sat, his body tense as he met her gaze. The nervous energy radiating from his taut stance kept her in her seat as she was reminded of the last time they had seen one another.

But everything was different now.

Slowly, she stood from her place on the bench, as if a wooden doll coming to life, her reddened eyes
not leaving the chocolate ones holding her gaze. Her movement prompted him to speak, the chocolate melting as his eyes softened.

“I took the first train I could get,” he whispered, shattering the months of silence that had fallen between them.

The pricking feeling returned behind Anne’s eyes. Despite everything that had happened between them, he was here now, the curve of his brow laden not with pity, as all the others had, but with a shared sorrow.

A strangled cry escaped from her lips as she went to him, her arms finding their way around his waist. She buried her face in the soft fabric of his sweater as he folded himself around her, enveloping her in a tight embrace. Her eyes burned and her body began to rack with dry sobs as Matthew’s loss washed over her anew, her cold fingers twisting in Gilbert’s sweater as she clung to him to stay afloat amidst the tidal wave of grief.

Anne could not be certain how much time had passed when exhaustion finally took over her body, dissolving her sobs into small tremors that periodically passed over her frame. As her mind stilled, Anne realized that she was still clinging to Gilbert, the knuckles of her fists turning white against the slate grey of his sweater. She loosened her grip, allowing the rumpled fabric to slip from her hands.

She tilted her face up towards him as she moved away slightly, the fingertips that had found their way into her hair sliding between the red strands, retreating, and falling back to his side. He gazed down at her, forehead wrinkled in concern and eyes brimming with tears of his own.

The sound of heeled boots against the stairs signaled Marilla’s descent into the kitchen. Gilbert stepped away from Anne, the weight of his palm against her waist remaining even as he took his hand away.

“Oh, Gilbert!” Marilla cried, fresh tears springing to her swollen eyes as she caught sight of the young man in her kitchen. She hesitated before approaching him, swaying slightly on her feet. After another moment’s consideration and a mumble discernable only to herself, she closed the distance between them with arms outstretched. At the invitation, Gilbert wrapped his arms around her, eyes falling closed over her shoulder.

Anne watched in muted disbelief, equal amounts unsure what to make of the display before her and pleased that it was occurring, a warm feeling stirring in her chest.

After a few moments, Marilla relinquished Gilbert from her grasp, holding him at arm’s length and surveying the young man who now had a good number of inches on her.

“You look more and more like John with each passing day,” she murmured. Gilbert smiled gently at her words, his kind eyes sparkling and seeming to know more than what Anne was privy to.

“I’ve only just come from the train station. I ought to stop home and check in with Bash and Mary, but I shall return this afternoon to help Jerry plant in the afternoon.”

Marilla waved her hand at him. “No need! The Cuthberts don’t accept charity,” she said stubbornly, and Anne knew she was resolute in her opinion.

“Ms. Cuthbert,” he started, then amended, “Marilla.”

She paused.

“Let me help you,” he said in earnest, his voice low. His eyes pleaded with the older woman.
Anne watched as something shifted in Marilla’s countenance as she sized Gilbert up once more.

“Very well,” she acquiesced finally. “Thank you, Gilbert. I will let Jerry know.” She gave a small *humph* as she turned from him them, her eyes far away.

Gilbert smiled, his eyes shifting back to meet Anne’s gaze. She froze.

“I’d better go,” he said, before nodding and disappearing out of the front door in two long strides.

Anne blinked. Panic began to well in her chest as words remained unsaid between them. She needed him to know that she forgave him, for everything. She needed him to forgive her. She couldn’t let him go, not yet, not like this.

Her muscles screamed as she sprang from where she stood, her bare feet crossing the floorboards of the kitchen, then the porch, her toes burying in the soft dirt as she chased Gilbert down the lawn.

Fortunately, he had not gotten far. He turned upon hearing her approach, confusion pinching his brows together. Anne slowed as she reached him, palm pressed against the bodice of her dress as she fought for air.

“Gilbert,” she said breathless, his name coming out in a gasp. “I have to-”

“Anne,” he interrupted her. “It’s alright.”

The service held for Matthew on that Sunday was a quiet affair. There had only been a few dozen people in attendance, but those who mattered most were all present. The minister gave his usual sermon and readings - Anne recognized them from Mr. Blythe’s service years before - and as the solemn company filed out of the church gates to return to their warm hearths and happy homes, Anne squeezed Diana’s fingers so tightly that she might have crushed them.

“Thank you for being here,” she whispered, the warmth of her gratitude towards her bosom friend slightly loosening the knot seated in her stomach.

“Of course,” Diana replied, returning Anne’s squeeze of her fingers. She smiled thinly at the redhead, pity ghosting around her dark irises.

“Diana!”

Anne flinched as Mrs. Barry called for her daughter, her sharp voice piercing the solemn quiet around them. After one final squeeze, Diana relinquished Anne’s fingers from her grasp and hurried off to join her mother. Anne watched them as they walked away, eventually turning down the lane and out of her sight.

She looked around at the few who remained talking in hushed pairs and trios. Across the courtyard, she spotted two young men matched for height speaking with bowed heads. Anne approached them, nervous hands coming together in front of her as she made her way to them.

“Thank you for helping out yesterday,” Jerry said, his usually bright eyes shadowed as he addressed the other man.

“Mr. Cuthbert once offered to do the same for me,” Gilbert replied, gaze becoming a bit unfocused with the memory. “I’ll plan to come by in the afternoons this week, after I help Bash with our own fields.” Jerry blinked at him.
“Are you not going back to school?”

“No,” Gilbert said shortly, his gaze falling to the toe of his boots.

Jerry nodded, his gaze shifting from Gilbert to peer over his shoulder at the redheaded woman approaching them. His teeth found the inside of his cheek as he noted the pallor of her skin, the wring of her hands, and the unease of her step, wishing beyond all that there was something he could do to ease her pain and knowing full well that there was not.
The soles of Anne’s boots crunched along the drive leading down to the barn from the stoop of Green Gables, small stones shifting in the dirt beneath her feet. She carried with her a woven basket, the contents of which were obscured by a thick cloth adorned with tiny embroidered roses. The edge of the basket banged gently against her thigh as she walked, the delicate romance of the rose handkerchief and the divine smell rising from within contrasting sharply with the deep black of her skirts.

Coming upon the threshold of the barn, she slid aside the door easily and stepped inside, her gaze settling on a man hunched over the sawhorse. Anne cleared her throat.

“I’ve brought you some scones. I thought you might be hankering for a bite before you get on with the day.” She extended the basket to Jerry as he straightened, coming out from behind the sawhorse.

“Merci,” he thanked her, taking the basket in his large hands, encrusted in a dark grey dust. Anne nodded, offering him a thin smile.

“They’re blueberry, your favorite,” she said, attempting to sound more cheerful for the farmhand’s sake. Her smile widened half-heartedly into a lopsided grimace.

Jerry nodded, returning her effort with a small smile of his own.

Unable to stand the silence that threatened to stretch between them, Anne continued.

“What are you working on today?” she asked.

“Uh, the upper field needs to be tilled today, but the mare’s shoe needs replacing, so I’m waiting for Gilbert to come back from his farm with a new one.”

Anne’s brows pinched together.

“Oh, isn’t he due back at school soon? Surely he can’t be allowed to miss so many lessons,” she said, her voice pitching upwards with concern.

Now it was Jerry’s turn to look confused, his own brow furrowing.

“He didn’t tell you? Anne, he’s not going back.” Jerry watched Anne closely as her brows unknit and rose upward in earnest surprise, her cerulean eyes widening.

Just then, the sliding back of the barn door startled them both from their conversation. They turned to watch the curly-haired man enter, a large horseshoe grasped in his left hand. As he caught sight of the woman in black standing across from the farmhand, his brows rose in mirrored surprise.

“Oh, Anne!” he exclaimed, a bit breathless from his walk back to the property. “Good morning.” He tipped his cap to her slightly from his place just inside the door.
“Good morning, Gilbert,” she returned, only a small touch of the startle he had given her coloring her voice now.

An awkward silence fell across the barn as Gilbert searched for something else to say, coming up empty-handed as Anne’s cerulean eyes became intently focused on the sawdust coating the floor around her feet. Neither noticed Jerry looking between them, his eyes narrowing at the odd tension filling the room.

“So, you’ve got the shoe?” Jerry spoke up, gesturing to Gilbert, who still stood just inside the barn door. His voice seemed to break Gilbert from his stupor, the young man’s face perking up at the indication.

“Oh, yes, yes. Here you go,” he said, his long legs carrying him closer to where Jerry and Anne stood. He handed the shoe to Jerry, who promptly turned away from them, disappearing into the stall where the mare was tied.

Anne pulled on her fingers nervously, her head still bowed to the sawdust on the floor.

“I best be getting back to the house now,” she said finally, raising her head to address the young man who lingered beside her.

“Let me walk you back,” Gilbert said. Anne accepted his offer, giving a small nod and the two set off up the lane, two pairs of boots crunching along the packed earth.

“I have to go to the bank in Charlottetown this afternoon to receive an estimate on Green Gables. Marilla would go, but her eyesight is failing her more and more these days, and she never really had a head for numbers besides,” Anne said, her eyes trained on the ground before her. She could tell from the pause that followed her words that Gilbert was posing himself to protest.

“But we’re planting the fields. There’s no need to sell,” he insisted, his voice tight with conviction.

Anne shook her head sadly, eyes still downcast.

“Yes, and it has been so generous of you to have stayed so long to help us, but you must go back to school,” Anne said with equal conviction, her eyes raising to survey Gilbert’s face as she finished speaking. His brow was furrowed, his eyes dark with a determination Anne hadn’t expected to see.

“But I need you at Redmond,” Anne said, her words chasing at the heels of his own. His glance flicked up at her, his gold-flecked eyes narrowed in confusion.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Anne’s gaze fell back to the road, her voice lowering.

“At least one of us must achieve our dreams, and it is looking quite likely now that I may never be able to reach my own.” Tears welled up along her lower lashes, poised to fall at the next blink of her eye.

The day Matthew had passed, so to had her visions of going to college and becoming a teacher one day in the future. With her failing eyesight and increasing age, Marilla could not manage the running of Green Gables alone, a truth to which Anne had become acutely aware in the weeks following his death. Not only had she lost Matthew, but with him, the future she had dared allow herself to dream of.
Gilbert’s eyes softened as they slowed, nearing the quiet porch of the house, the front door standing slightly ajar and swaying in the gentle breeze of the morning.

“School can wait, Green Gables cannot.” He peered down at her earnestly, his words steady with the same exhausting conviction. She searched his face, finding no hint of reservation in the wrinkling of his brow or the set of his jaw.

She took one of his hands, dirt caking the folds of his palm, and squeezed it gently before turning away to ascend the porch steps and disappear behind the heavy oak door.
The thick vine of bitterness grew inside Anne, thorn-encrusted tendrils curling tighter around her veins with each passing day, seemingly innocuous beneath the sorrow raging on the surface of her pallid skin.

Anne glimpsed herself in the mirror that hung above her dresser, red-rimmed eyes skirting over the dark fabric of her mourning gown. The black lace of the collar chaffed against the soft skin of her neck, leaving it red and raw.

She hated this dress. When Marilla had presented it to her after Matthew’s death, Anne had thought bitterly of her juvenile wish to own more dresses, ones embellished with lace and puffed sleeves. Perhaps the morbid irony of the situation gave some divine spirit a sadistic pleasure, but Anne found no amusement in it.

She groaned, tearing her gaze from her sour reflection, instead turning to peer out of her bedroom window. On the other side of the glass, the dogwood was bursting with blossoms, cheerful and bright, the white petals fluttering in the soft breeze. Her chest constricted as she was reminded of her first meeting with dear Matthew, riding beside him beneath the bud-laden boughs of the White Way of Delight, hopes of finding a home where she would finally belong falling from her lips in a frenzied rush. He had not minded how much she spoke back then, and further still, had never grown weary of the company of her words.

As she watched the blossom-laden branches dance in the wind, the tendrils slid tighter around her heart, chasing the air from her lungs.

Palm pressed to the bodice of her dress, Anne ripped herself away from the window, carrying herself out of the room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen.

She sucked air between clenched teeth as she entered the room, uncomfortably warm with the combined heat of the hearth and the sunlight pouring through the windowpanes. Anne felt sweat begin to bead up on her nape.

On the edge of the kitchen table, where they had remained untouched since the day Jerry came crashing in, lay her schoolbooks. Anne had not been able to return to school on account of Marilla’s need of her with the financial matters and bank negotiations, not to mention the continued upkeep of Green Gables itself.

Anger flared in her chest as she thought of all the lessons she had missed, and was missing even now, standing dumbly as she was in the kitchen, powerless to change the new circumstances of her life. Bile rose in her throat, scorching as hot tears began to well in her eyes.

The bitterness constricted once more, black leaves unfurling around her heart.

Anne felt the overwhelming need to scream until the air was gone from her lungs and her throat was raked raw with her shrieking. She wanted to hit something, to lash out, her small fists sinking into the skin of the offender who had ruined her life, his flesh yielding under her knuckles.

But there was no one to blame, this Anne knew.
She seethed as the walls of helplessness closed around her, blood rushing in her ears. Anne buried her nails into her palms as she fought to reclaim herself, the anger climbing her neck and into her ears.

The faint chirping of a swallow outside slipped into her awareness, the bright song grating against the darkness of her bitter despair.

The tendrils held firm as the black leaves folded over her heart.

The soles of Anne’s boots carried her across the hardwood, out the front door, and across the lawn. Blinded by hot, angry tears, she ran, boots pounding into the dirt as she fled, quickly surpassing the fencepost that marked the end of the property. She did not falter, continuing without pause as her hair fell loose to stream behind her, like the fiery trail of a comet streaking across the sky.

Tears slid down her flushed cheeks, clinging to her lips and leaving the taste of salt on her tongue.

Suddenly she was flung forward, her knees falling into the dirt as the toe of her boot caught on a root or some such other uneven footing. The tears in her lashes obscured her vision still, the world around her a hazy mixture of auburns and verdant greens. Anne’s fingers wound their way into her hair, bracing against her temples as she trembled on the ground.

*He can’t be gone. He can’t be gone. He can’t be gone.*

She blinked away the unabating tears as she rocked herself back and forth, the salty droplets falling against her dark skirts and disappearing into the black fabric. Anne winced as a skewer of pain passed behind her eyes, her despair taking its toll on her body.

She sat up slowly, brushing the tears from her cheeks with shaking hands. A small petal, delicate and white, slipped from her palm and fluttered into her lap. Anne turned over her hands to find several similar petals stuck against her skin, crumpled in the folds of her palms and darkened with soil.

Her gaze lifted from her hands to the ground on which she sat, noticing for the first time that it too was coated in small, white petals. Looking up further still, the trees overhead were adorned with the soft white, blushing with apple blossoms.

She whimpered.

*How could the world continue to be so beautiful when he was no longer in it?*

Anne scuttled backwards, curling up against a nearby tree trunk, knees pulled tightly into her chest. She buried her face in them, her loose hair falling forward and hiding her face. Her arms, still tremoring, wound around her legs, pulling them in even closer.

“Anne?”

Her head shot up, eyes wide and afraid like a startled doe’s.

Gilbert raised his hands defensively, palms and fingers spread wide, a cautioned crease across his forehead.

“I can leave you be, if you like,” he said softly, not moving closer or nearer as he spoke.

Upon recognizing the intruder, Anne’s gaze had fallen to his boots, one perched against a raised root, the other firmly planted in the soil. She imagined the pivot of his foot against the wood as he turned to leave and felt a sharp desire for it to not be so.
“No. No, that’s alright,” she said, her voice weak and thin. Anne cleared her throat, wiping away a few tears lingering along her lashes.

“Alright,” he said, his voice no more than a whisper. He approached her slowly, eyes wary of a change in her mind. Detecting no such change, he reached her, lowering himself beside her, his long legs finding their place amongst the roots with a graceful ease.

A few inches remained between their shoulders, and Anne waited for Gilbert to say something more, but he did not, his gaze becoming unfocused as he stared through the trees of the orchard.

After a few minutes, Anne felt the vice grip on her body relax, the bitterness receding into the shadows. A soft breeze filtered between the branches overhead, christening the ground in a new layer of white.

She peeked at the boy beside her, wondering if the softness in his eye was brought on by the memory of a time when this orchard was bathed in white and things were different.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, I apologize for the long hiatus. Long story short, I lost inspiration and energy for this story over the summer, but now that I am back at school I am ready to go again, especially with season 3 coming out so soon!! (AHHHHHHHHH) I am determined to finish this story by then, so we're getting close. Thanks for sticking with me, and welcome to anyone that's new!!

Stay tuned for the next chapter *spoiler* featuring the babysitting moment we all deserve!
Anne couldn’t help but feel cheerful as a swath of morning sunshine warmed her through the kitchen window as she bustled about the kitchen. Giving the small sack in her hands a gentle shake, she poured freshly ground coffee into a small bowl on the counter. The kettle already hung in the fireplace, the faint bubbling of the water inside barely audible across the room.

The staircase groaned as Marilla’s boot heels fell against the wooden boards, the sharp clicks becoming no less dull as she reached the bottom and started towards the kitchen.

“Good morning, Marilla,” Anne chirped, giving a wide smile to her mother.

“Good morning, Anne,” she returned, a twinge of warmth coloring her usual stern tone. She pointed a finger at the kitchen table.

Anne followed her indication with a twist of her head, the sack of coffee still in her hand. A neatly folded shirt that Anne hadn’t noticed before was laid on the edge of the table.

“Please take that with you when you go to see Mary today,” she directed as she pulled a loaf of bread from a cupboard. “It’s Gilbert’s. There was a split in the seam that needed mending, but I’m through with it now, and he’ll be missing it I’m sure.”

“Sure, I’ll go right after breakfast.”

Marilla nodded curtly to signal her satisfaction but gave no more instruction. With a few swift cuts of a knife, she carved a few slices off the loaf and tossed them onto the stove top to brown. Anne collected the kettle from the fireplace and went about brewing the coffee.

A few minutes later, black coffee settled in their mugs and toast plucked fresh off the stove, the two women sat down to breakfast. They ate in silence, the crunch of the toast and the clink of the mugs against the tabletop the only break in the quiet. Ever since Matthew’s passing, meals had become hushed as this one was, no conversation feeling worthy enough to tear either woman away from imagining that he still sat at the head of the table.

The meal quickly came to an end. The women stood and brought their dishes to the basin, cleaning them in equally comfortable quiet. Once they were returned to the cupboards, Anne picked up the shirt, gave Marilla a nod, and went on her way out the door.

As she walked the familiar route, Anne found amusement in studying the fabric she carried. It was soft, worn thin with dozens of washes, the thread even warped in a few places, creating small windows between the fibers. The eggshell color was mottled with faint grass and mud stains. Despite its condition, Anne could tell that it was loved, perhaps even a favorite of Gilbert’s, and she smiled to think of it.

The walk to the Blythe residence was short and well known to Anne, but as her feet carried her up the porch steps, Anne started at finding herself to have arrived so quickly.

With a firm wrap of her knuckles, she knocked on the door twice and took a step back, smoothing her skirts with her hands. They were no longer the black of her mourning gown, but a blushing beige. Though rather uninspired, Anne had been relieved to return to wearing color, any color, once
more.

As she waited, Anne smiled in anticipation of seeing her friend Mary again, thinking that she ought to also apologize for not coming by sooner.

Shuffling feet and the fuzzy outline of a figure behind the window curtain announced her approach, along with the muffled cries of an infant. Anne beamed as her excitement soared.

The brass knob turned, the door opening, revealing a harried Gilbert Blythe. A bundle of blankets was tucked in one of his arms and from within, a small face peeked out, its features screwed up in a wail.

“Anne, hello,” Gilbert said, his voice pitched up in surprise at seeing her there. He looked embarrassed to be caught with an inconsolable baby in his arms, but Anne ignored this, too enraptured with the mere existence of the child.

“Where’s Mary?” she asked as she moved closer to him and waggled her fingers at the bundle. Between cries, Anne was graced with the sight of two caramel eyes, slick with tears, blinking back at her.

“She and Bash are trying to get some rest. Henry here insisted on serenading them all night with his sobbing, so I offered to take over for them this morning. I was hoping to get him to sleep…” he trailed off, his failure of that final endeavor apparent as Henry let out another ear-splitting wail.

“Henry,” Anne whispered, touching the tip of her finger to his small cheek. She marveled at him for a few more moments before straightening, her jaw set and determination in her eye. “Well, first things you ought to lose the blanket. He’s probably awful hot all wrapped up like that. Summer is coming fast, you know.”

She bustled into the house, Gilbert on her heels as he began to disentangle Henry from the swath of blankets.

Dropping the shirt in her hands absently on the counter, Anne opened the nearest cabinet, pushing the contents aside. Gilbert watched with fractured attention as he unwrapped the final loop of cloth from around the baby in his hands.

“What’re you looking for?” he asked, tossing the blanket onto the back of a nearby chair.

“Have you got any dried chamomile? Perhaps for tea?” Anne asked, not pausing in her search to address him directly.

“We should. Try the pantry around the corner. Fourth shelf.”

Anne disappeared from view, returning moments later with a bundle of the dried flowers. With calm urgency, she took the kettle from the stove and poured in a small amount of water from a pitcher on the counter. Anne braced herself as another wail began to build in Henry’s throat.

In a flash, Anne had the kettle hanging in the fireplace, swinging slightly above the dying embers of the morning fire. Getting to her knees, she fanned the glowing bits of wood. As she blew on the small flames, she realized the cry she had been bracing for had never come.

She paused and sat up, looking to where Gilbert still stood by the door. Henry was cuddled against his shoulder now, his free hand rubbing the baby’s back in small soothing circles. He bounced lightly, his weight shifting from side to side as his lips moved in comforting whispers. Henry whimpered, his resolve wavering as his little body heaved with the residual effort of his sobs.
The whistle of the kettle brought Anne’s attention back to her task. Lifting the lid, she slid the chamomile in, leaving it to boil for a few moments longer before removing it from the heat. Plumes of steam buffeted her cheeks as she poured a small amount into a mug.

“Tea? How are you going to get him to drink it?” Gilbert asked as he peered into the mug, his voice a low whisper.

“He won’t need much,” Anne replied confidently, her lips puckering to blow gently on the steaming liquid. “Just keep on doing what you’re doing.”

Gilbert nodded without protest, watching with interest as Anne dipped her little finger in the tea a few minutes later, bringing the bead of amber liquid to Henry’s lips. His small mouth closed around the tip of her finger. When she pulled away, his tongue smacked against his top lip, the tea spreading inside his mouth. His frown subsided as interest took over, his eyes growing wide.

Anne dipped her finger in again, repeating the process a handful of times, only pausing when Henry’s eyelids began to droop, his head falling heavily against Gilbert’s shoulder.

Gently, Anne set the mug down on the table as she watched Henry’s features smooth into slumber. Triumphant, she looked to Gilbert and they shared a broad smile, celebrating their little victory.

“I’ll go clean this up,” Anne said, gesturing to the mug and tea pot beside her. He nodded, and she took the dishes lightly into her hands, carrying them over to the basin. As she poured water over them, she glanced back to see Gilbert pressing a soft kiss against the baby’s temple.

Warmth exploded inside Anne, and for a moment she thought she saw him standing there, dark hair streaked with silver, the infant in his arms pale and with the same chocolate curls, eyes shining a brilliant sapphire blue.

She blinked and it was gone.

Anne let out a frazzled breath, which drew his gaze. Soft eyes locked with hers and a shiver tickled over her skin, but she didn’t look away.

“You’re good at this,” he whispered, his voice low, lashes dipping as he glanced at the baby on his shoulder.

“So are you,” Anne replied.

He shrugged. “I wonder if they teach that trick of yours in medical school,” he joked, though a shadow fell across his features. In moments, he recovered his easy smile, but not before Anne had seen the sadness in the curve of his mouth.

She realized that he must be thinking of another life where he might have taken another path, where he might have made a different choice. One where he returned to Redmond, or one, perhaps, where he never came back to Avonlea at all. Anne was suddenly gripped with a terror of these untraveled paths and found herself relieved beyond measure that out of every path he could have chosen, he chose the one that led him to be standing there before her, his nephew asleep on his shoulder.

When Matthew passed, Gilbert had known that she needed him even when she herself did not. Putting his dreams aside for the sake of her family, he had returned to Avonlea of his own volition, giving to them more than they could ever hope to repay. He did this, despite everything that had transpired between them. An ordinary man would not have been able to swallow his pride so, but Gilbert was neither ordinary nor proud. No, he was good and kind. Even from their early days as scholastic rivals, he had never wished ill against her, finding as much satisfaction in her successes as
his own.

Indeed, Anne was sure there could not be a more selfless man who walked the earth, nor one whom she could love more.

“I’m going to go put him down. I’ll be back.” The comforting familiarity of his voice broke through Anne’s thoughts, sending a tender ache through her chest. Even as he disappeared down the hallway, the warmth of him overwhelmed her still. She felt at once that she might be sick on her shoes or that she might be light enough to float away.

Moments later, his tall frame reentered the kitchen, his features friendly and open. He smiled at her as he rubbed the back of his neck with a large palm, the exhaustion of caring for a crying infant all morning settling onto his shoulders.

For all her reading and writing, Anne had never imagined that she might find herself completely in want of words as she was at that moment. She stood there dumbly as she searched for the phrases to convey to him the rush of emotion surging through her, her stare becoming transfixed on a square of gold light falling against his cheek through the window.

Perhaps years had come and went in silence before Anne remembered herself, recalling the initial reason for her visit to the small cottage. She lifted the worn shirt from the counter where she had left it, holding the bundle out to him with trembling fingers.

“Marilla, she mended this for you,” she said, hoping the thickness of her voice did not convey the dryness of her mouth.

“Thanks,” he said, his gaze mesmerizing her once more. The gold flecks in his eyes gleamed as he studied her. He stood so close that she could see his eyes flicking between her own. She hardly dared to breathe, wondering if he might find what he was looking for in their sapphire depths.

“Anyway,” he finally breathed, interrupting the silence stretching between them.

“Anyway,” she echoed, before blinking a few times as if awakening from a dream. “I should go.”

She bid him farewell and stepped into the humid heat of the day, feeling increasingly cold with each step she took away from the house.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, amiright!!!
Too Late

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The weathered oak of the floorboards creaked beneath Anne’s bare feet as she padded down the second-floor hallway, the soft hem of her nightdress brushing over her toes.

She had been unable to find solace in sleep from the chaotic spinning of her thoughts, spending the better part of an hour staring at the ceiling as images of kind, gold-flecked eyes and a familiar lopsided grin pulled at every fiber of her heart. His easy-going laugh, the slant of his shoulders, the furrow of his brow all swam through her head, terrifyingly intoxicating. It was as if a veil had been lifted from her eyes, revealing the world to be filled with colors she had never before seen, and with it, darker shadows of uncertainty and fear that threatened to swallow Anne whole if she gave them so much as half a glance.

Exhausted from tiptoeing around her own mind, she had pulled herself from the bed where she lay to go in search of council.

She was unsurprised to find candlelight spilling through the gap between the floorboards and Marilla’s bedroom door, the warm orange light flickering and scattering shadows across Anne’s path. Ever since Matthew, Marilla sat up late into the evenings, unable to will herself to sleep.

Anne’s knuckles fell gently against the door.

“Marilla?” Anne twisted the knob and cracked the door open without waiting for a response.

The older woman was sat up in bed against her pillows, a photo album spread across her lap. As Anne entered, she looked up, concern deepening the curve of her brow.

“What is it, Anne?” she asked as she removed her spectacles, folding them in her hands.

“I fear I’ve made a mistake,” Anne replied, her voice shaking with uncertainty. Marilla’s brow relaxed, and she shifted back into her pillows.

“We all make mistakes, Anne. It’s alright,” she said reassuringly, turning another page of the album.

Anne bit her lower lip, which had begun to wobble. Seating herself on the edge of the bed, she persisted, her fingers twisting in the cotton sheets on either side of her.

“But, what if the mistake is so great that it changes the course of your life?” Her eyes were wide as she watched Marilla’s features contort once again, confusion coloring her expression.

“What are you going on about, Anne? What’s happened?” Marilla asked, closing the album in her lap and putting it aside.

Anne shifted her gaze to her feet, her toes barely brushing the floor from where she sat. The memory that had haunted her since she left the Blythe household that morning came again to the forefront of her mind. She could almost feel the soft snow brushing her cheeks as they had drained of color, her world seeming to fall apart beneath the bare branches of apple trees.

“What are you going on about, Anne? What’s happened?” Marilla asked, closing the album in her lap and putting it aside.

Do you remember last winter when Gilbert… proposed?” she asked, her throat clenching on the last word, a sharp ache surging through her body.
“Of course, I remember-” Marilla began to say with an air of dismissiveness. Indeed, how could she ever forget a thing like that! But as Anne retrained her doleful eyes, glistening in the firelight with unshed tears, on her, Marilla stopped abruptly, finally grasping the gravity of Anne’s tone.

Anne watched as Marilla eyes softened with understanding, taking on a sadness of their own.

“You don’t mean to tell me…” she began hesitantly, her voice low and gentle as she reached out a hand to lay comfortingly upon Anne’s arm.

Anne swallowed roughly before giving a small nod, the tears dancing in her eyes.

“…your feelings have changed?”

A tear slid silently down Anne’s cheek as she searched Marilla’s face, feeling at once like she was a small child again, helpless and lost. The fondness in Marilla’s gaze was unparalleled, and if Anne had been in a clearer state of mind, she might have noticed the pleasure that took hold in the wrinkles around the older woman’s eyes at hearing of her daughter’s revelation.

“What do I do?” Anne croaked, despair strangling her voice.

“Why don’t you tell him? Clearly the boy shares your affections,” Marilla said, keeping her tone even and soothing. Anne groaned immediately.

“That’s just it, Marilla! I can’t, because I rejected him so harshly. He would be a fool to want me now, after I have embarrassed him and surely wounded his pride.” Anne buried her face in her hands as sobs overtook her small frame.

As she cried, Marilla ran her hand in soothing circles against her back, small “shhs” and “nows” filtering from her lips. Anne crumbled beside her, folding in on herself as if trying to make herself small enough to escape the enormity of her emotions as her small frame racked with sobs.

Only after Anne’s shivering began to subside did Marilla speak again.

“You don’t want to live a life with regrets, as I have done, Anne. That is not what I want for you.” Marilla could hardly keep the quiver from her own voice.

Anne shook her head again, her red hair following in small waves. She wiped a tear from her cheek as she met Marilla’s eyes, her face hollow and aged.

“He won’t have me now. It’s too late.”

Chapter End Notes

Y’all I cannot wait for season 3!! Are you as excited as I am?? Do you think we’ll get a Shirbert kiss this season?
“That’s fabulous, Jerry!” Anne beamed at the farmhand, her freckled cheeks dimpling with pleasure.

“Oui!” he exclaimed, sharing her grin as he shuffled around the stall, careful not to spook the dairy cow beside him. The lids over its huge eyes fell lazily as it gnawed on a sprig of hay.

Anne leaned against the weathered fence, her arms crossed upon the top beam as her chin came to rest on the backs of her hands.

“You’ll have to tell me all about it,” she said, following him with her eyes as he crossed the stall to meet her where she stood.

“To be sure,” he promised, dark eyes sparkling with excitement. His younger brother had just been taken on as a smithy’s apprentice after struggling to find work elsewhere. The boy was hardly fourteen, and gangly as ever, at least to Jerry’s description, but he was skilled with a mallet and pull of hot iron.

The squeal of the barn door rolling aside heavily in its rusty setting startled Anne from their happy exchange, and as she looked over her shoulder in the direction of the newcomer, she felt her easy smile fall from her cheeks.

“Good afternoon,” he said cheerfully, giving both Jerry and Anne a wide grin as he approached. A sheen of sweat coated his tanned skin, plastering his dark curls to his forehead. The lengthy sleeves of his tunic where rolled to his elbows, exposing strong forearms equally tanned and freckled by the sun.

“Afternoon, Gilbert,” Jerry returned with equal politeness, his eyes flicking to Anne who had frozen beside him, looking as if a doe poised to flee. She drank in the sight of him as Jerry searched for something else to say, but Gilbert beat him to it, his gaze captured by the rigid redhead, the two of them seemingly locked to the other.

“It’s good to see you, Anne. Have you gone back to school?” he asked, keenly aware that he had not had the pleasure of seeing her about Green Gables in recent days and finding no other explanation. She stared at him, her eyes like sapphire saucers set into her flushing skin.

“Yes, I have been quite busy. In fact, I must go now. Excuse me,” she said, her reply rushing out of her as she broke from her immobile state to hurry past him and out the barn door. The door slammed against the frame behind her, the crack echoing through the rafters.

The two men watched in bewilderment as she fled, Gilbert turning back to give Jerry a quizzical look, only to find the farmhand’s gaze narrowed in accusation.
“What did you say to her?” he demanded, strong arms crossing over his chest. Gilbert recoiled, shock flickering over his features.

“What do you mean?” he asked defensively, his eyes widening.

“To Anne. You must’ve said something to her,” Jerry said, offering no further clarification.

The muscle beneath Jerry’s cheek flexed as he set his jaw, preparing to stand his ground. Confusion and irritation at being accused in this way set Gilbert’s heart racing, the pounding in his chest palpable through the thin fabric of his shirt. He shook his head as he flipped through his most recent memories, only able to spot the mystifying woman in his own kitchen, her little finger dipping into a mug of chamomile tea. But that had been over a week ago, and to his knowledge, nothing had transpired to earn him this kind of confrontation from the farmhand whom he had come to consider a friend.

“Nothing!” he insisted, his voice rising alongside his frustration. “I’ve said nothing to her!” Gilbert could feel heat climbing to the tips of his ears and imagined that they must be turning to the color of tomatoes right before harvest.

Jerry shifted his weight uncomfortably, his lips twisting as he studied the flustered man before him. The notion that he could have been wrong about Gilbert began to creep into his consciousness, sending his mind reeling for a touch hold of the understanding he thought he had had only moments before. Nevertheless, he remained skeptical, a brow arching as he studied Gilbert whose eyes searched his own face for some shred of clarity, the muscles just under his flushing skin taught with a rising fury.

Thus, the two most important men in Anne’s life stood together, confounded, as each had been so many times before, by the redhead’s peculiar behavior.

Finally, Jerry huffed, his shoulders brushing his ears as he shrugged. Chewing his lip, he moved to pick up the pitchfork that rested an arms-length away against the fence penning in the cattle. Taking it up into his hands, he began to paw the ground with the dust-covered prongs, shifting stray straw and cakes of dirt about, his brow furrowed.

“Tell me what’s been going on,” Gilbert demanded, unwilling to let the topic go. He followed the scrape of the pitchfork with his eyes as Anne’s wide-eyed gaze plagued his mind.

For many long moments, Jerry continued to shuffle the debris on the barn floor about without speaking. It was all Gilbert could do to contain his irritation as the farmhand collected his thoughts, he himself chewing the inside of his cheek raw as he waited.

At long last, the younger boy sighed, the pitchfork in his hand scraping to a halt as he addressed the question.

“It feels sort of like… like, last winter,” he said, mulling over his words, brows pinched together as he recalled the previous season.

Sparing a glance up at Gilbert, he grimaced as the curly-haired man’s face steeled, a deep blush rising into his neck and cheeks. He didn’t meet Jerry’s eyes, his gaze transfixed on the heap of debris Jerry had piled between them.

“Now, I don’t know what exactly happened between the two of you,” Jerry pushed on, his tone matter of fact.
Gilbert’s jaw locked as the beginnings of tears pricked at the back of his eyes, the memory of that snowy day in the orchard returning with a sting as bitter as the day it had happened.

“But I won’t let you hurt her again.”

At his words, Gilbert’s head snapped up, his chocolate eyes dark with indignation. He opened his mouth to protest, for he could never hurt her, the mere thought paining him greatly. But as he took in the gravity of Jerry’s expression, his lips fell together silently, for he had. He had hurt Anne that day, perhaps irrevocably.

Jerry’s brows pitched up as he watched Gilbert sadly, anguish rolling over the kind man’s features. His love for her was so plain; Jerry had always seen it there in the brightness of his smile and the careful attention he reserved solely for her. He pitied his besotted friend, knowing full well that Anne may never concede to acknowledging her unparalleled luster for life when he was around, and much less the vigil she kept at the parlor window as he worked in the fields each day.

Jerry sighed, feeling the raw burn of the rope around his wrists.

“I know you’re a good man, Gilbert. I have seen as much for myself. And she still cares for you.”

Gilbert raised his head, a glimmer of hope seeping into the corners of his eyes.

Jerry chuckled.

“She asks after you every day, you know. I come in from working the fields, and she asks after the day and the weather, and then you, though I suspect it makes her sad to hear it.”

A thousand thoughts cluttered Gilbert’s mind as he tried to make sense of Jerry’s words. Did Anne miss him and their time together as he did? Did she want to see more of each other? If that were true, why would she run from him as she had just done? She still cares for you, Jerry had said. Gilbert’s heart felt like it might burst at the mere possibility of it.

“Whatever you did this time, I suggest you fix it quickly,” Jerry said, sadness turning down the corners of his mouth. “I can’t watch her grieve anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

If you want to follow me on Tumblr @elderofavonlea, please do! I am thinking of taking requests for some *shorter* fics, if you guys would be into that! Shoot me an ask!

As always, thanks for reading and let me know what you thought of the chapter!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!