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The Old-Fashioned Girls

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The Old-Fashioned Girls

I have an unfortunate history of destroying my mother’s possessions. When I was four, for instance, I twined my hands in the thin-spun gold of the necklace she wore to her wedding and broke the strand, an offense from which she long ago recovered but which still provokes sadness and shame in me. I never destroyed anything else she held truly precious, but that one misstep was enough to make me cautious around the things that she loved for the rest of my childhood.

Because of this, perhaps, she was careful about allowing me access to her books. These were the guiding lights of her childhood, and she taught me to think of them with reverence: Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women, An Old-Fashioned Girl*, and *Eight Cousins*; L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea*; Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *A Little Princess and The Secret Garden*; Noel Streatfield’s *Ballet Shoes*. As a determined, romantic, dreamy child in the 1950s and 60s she had loved these novels. I was her only daughter, serious, creative and easily over-stimulated, and she longed for me to read them. Still, her copies of these books were those she’d preserved from her own childhood, so she waited for my troublesome hands to turn trustworthy.

I looked at the books with reverence but without curiosity until the day I discovered a new paperback edition of *Rose in Bloom*—the sequel to *Eight Cousins*—on the bookshelf in my room. The cover image, which struck me as impossibly romantic, was of a blond girl in a high-necked cream dress with a dark purple sash. She sat demurely in a similarly dark armchair, around which were clustered three men, all young, handsome, and honey-haired, each gazing admiringly at her. I had just developed my first real crush, and for reasons long forgotten I’d wanted to change my name to Rose for
years. I was sold. I begged my mother to let me read it, but she insisted I take *Eight Cousins* first, placing her old copy—bound in shades of green and white reminiscent of the palette of old-fashioned linoleum—in my hands.

I was immediately enraptured. Rose was an orphan who lived on a hill with her guardian, Uncle Alec, eight adoring male cousins, and innumerable meddling aunts. The world she inhabited seemed purely joyful. She read poetry on mountainsides with Mac, the bookworm, learned the routines of housework with her best friend, Phebe, was teased pleasantly by the mischievous Charlie and unbearably by the vapid Annabel Bliss, coddled Jamie, the baby, and was coddled in turn by her legions of aunts. I swallowed the first book with glee and the second with a not-wholly-bitter melancholy; *Rose in Bloom* remains the only book that has ever made me cry. I moved from those to *Little Women* and then, dutifully, its two less inspiring sequels, falling in love with Jo March along the way. I read *An Old Fashioned Girl* while on vacation with my family, so thrilled by the novel’s atmosphere I insisted on being allowed to read by firelight. I was enchanted by the vision I created of myself, a small and serious nightgown-clad creature crouched with fetching intensity on some lonely hearth. My parents, sitting behind me in the flickering dark, watched indulgently.

Next came Anne, spelled always with an “e,” red-haired, freckled, impetuous, wise. I loved Anne with an intensity I’d never before attached to either a fictional character or a flesh-and-blood friend. She was an emblem of all that seemed best and most romantic in the world. There are six *Anne* novels, but I initially inherited my mother’s copies of only the first two. These taught me to understand the full, peculiar joy attached to old editions of old-fashioned books. *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of
Avonlea were a treat to open: thick cream-colored pages and outdated fonts, spines slowly peeling off those unlucky enough to be bound in cloth or paper rather than leather. They smelled, and still do, like girlhood, floral in a prim, quiet way, the way I imagine a crinoline would smell if I ever saw one or, indeed, actually learned what a crinoline was.

I eventually found all but one of my mother’s copies of the Anne books stashed in our basement, yellow-paged but never forgotten, but until I unearthed these I supplemented my supply with cheap paperbacks, the spines of which are now faded and creased at the sections I re-read most often. My particular favorite is Anne of the Island, in which Anne goes to college. When I first read it I’d dreamt of college for as long as I could remember, and Anne’s adventures at Redmond only fueled my fascination. I couldn’t wait for the days when I too might attend walking parties with courteous, devoted suitors towards whom I would feel conflicted and ultimately, with heartfelt regret, reject. Like Anne, I wanted to attend proper balls, call on friends during the weekends, and spend my evenings sprawled in front of a fireplace with a plate of sharp green apples and a worn copy of The Pickwick Papers. Although my ideas about college have, understandably, changed radically since then, I re-read Anne of the Island along with both Eight Cousins and Rose in Bloom every December when I go home for the holidays. The three books have a comforting, familiar weight in my hands. This last trip home I finally discovered my mother’s old copy of Rose in Bloom, long lost, so my beloved paperback has finally surrendered precedence to a decades-old hardback, now snug on the shelf with its fellows.

These books taught me an enormous amount about how to live a life imbued with a proper mix of practicality, deep feeling, and fun. From Anne, for instance, I learned that
one should never attempt to bake a cake while suffering from a cold, that there is no activity more singly romantic than memorizing and reciting Alfred Noyes’ “The Highwayman,” that cemeteries are good places for introspection, that best friends make the best partners. Jo taught me that decorative gloves may seem charming but are in fact inconvenient, that the act of denying what is easy in favor of what fits fully with one’s spirit might often prove difficult but will always prove worthwhile, and that, occasionally, we have to grow into our own hearts. Rose showed me that friendship and love are, in that order, worth standing up for, that simple achievements are often the most rewarding, and that what is alluring is not always truly desirable. Her loyal Phebe, determined to earn her own way, helped me realize that loving others is sweeter when paired with enough independence that one may sustain oneself without them. I’ve returned to these girls and their wisdom with joy and wonder as I’ve left home on my own adventures, started creating my own stories, and added lessons I’ve learned independently to those with which they equipped me.

My girls, happy and free in their tomes, rest side-by-side on the bookshelf in my own sweet girlhood room. Collected from bookshelves in my mother’s childhood home, from boxes in our shared basement, from the stocks of local bookstores, from friends who have learnt of my love and contributed to my pursuit of it, they are a chronicle depicting all the richness, joy, and depth of life. They are treasures I will be careful not to ever damage, my most lasting and passionate literary loves, the dearest things yet transferred from my mother’s heart and hands to mine.
Bibliography


