HOUSE of DREAMS
The Life of L. M. Montgomery

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illustrated by Julie Morstad
For Eli and Anna,
and the great love between them.
And for Lily, of course, this book’s first reader.
And for Lois, kindred spirit.

L. R.
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On a late June afternoon in 1905, Maud Montgomery sat in her grandmother’s kitchen, writing. She sat not at the kitchen table, but perched on top of it, her feet set neatly on a nearby sofa, her notebook propped against her knees. From here she could jump down if someone stopped by for their mail, as was likely to happen—for the kitchen doubled as the post office of Cavendish, a tiny seaside village on Prince Edward Island.

Maud was thirty, but she looked younger, barely out of her teens. She had large, sparkling gray-blue eyes with long eyelashes, and a small mouth she sometimes covered
with her hand, since she thought her teeth her worst feature. She was medium height, slight, trim, and erect. Maud believed her one beauty to be her lustrous hair, a feature she’d inherited from her late mother. When she let it down at night, her hair hung past her knees in masses of soft brown waves. But most of the time she wore it up, pinned under the most fanciful and elaborate hats she could find.

At this moment Maud was working on a new story. Though she had just begun, she felt immediately transported to another world—a Cavendish-like place she would call Avonlea. Something about this story and its eager, orphaned heroine (“please call me Anne spelled with an e”) gripped Maud from the start. The words flowed smoothly onto her notebook. Her handwriting was never stronger or more sure. Maud began her tale not with her famous red-haired heroine but with the town of Avonlea itself and the sharp-eyed Mrs. Lynde who guards it. Maud wrote in one rushing paragraph-long opening sentence:

Mrs. Rachel Lynde lived just where the Avonlea main road dipped down into a little hollow, fringed with alders and ladies’ eardrops and traversed by a brook that had its source away back in the woods of the old Cuthbert place; it was reputed to be an intricate, headlong brook in its earlier course through those woods, with dark secrets of pool and cascade; but by the time it reached
Lynde's Hollow it was a quiet, well-conducted little stream, for not even a brook could run past Mrs. Rachel Lynde's door without due regard for decency and decorum; it probably was conscious that Mrs. Rachel was sitting at her window, keeping a sharp eye on everything that passed, from brooks and children up, and that if she noticed anything odd or out of place she would never rest until she had ferreted out the whys and wherefores thereof.

The day was dazzling after rain, and Maud sat in the late sunlight flooding in. Her moods were like the weather—brilliant one minute, overcast the next. June was Maud’s favorite month. You could practically count her happiness by Junes. She wrote about it more than all the other months combined, naming each of its beauties. When spring finally swept the north shore of Prince Edward Island, Maud abandoned her small, dark “winter bedroom” off the downstairs parlor and moved upstairs, where she could write and dream uninterrupted. No one else ventured up there; hidden, Maud was queen and sole resident of her springtime domain. But now she was working out in the open, intent on her new story, her pen racing to catch up to her thoughts.

She had just reached the point where nosy Mrs. Lynde wonders at her shy neighbor, Matthew Cuthbert, heading out with the buggy and sorrel mare, wearing his best suit:
“Now, where was Matthew Cuthbert going and why was he going there?”

Just at this moment, Maud was interrupted. The new minister in town, Ewan Macdonald, stopped by for his mail. Maud set her writing aside. Ewan was a shy, gentle bachelor who had lately moved to Cavendish, taking a room within walking distance of the Presbyterian Church, next door to the Macneill homestead, her grandparents’ house. He was a frequent visitor to the post office. To Maud, the young minister seemed a bit lonely. He was well educated, with hopeful prospects. Ewan Macdonald attracted local attention with his dark wavy hair, dimples, and lilting Gaelic accent. The accent was especially appealing to Maud, since she’d grown up hearing romantic tales of Scotland, the Old Country.

A handsome unmarried minister was a natural target for local gossip. The Cavendish girls were rumored to be “crazy about him,” and more than a few threw themselves in Ewan’s path. Maud was not one of them. She liked the shy Scotsman and enjoyed his company, but she was not looking for a suitor. She’d already had a few too many ardent proposals, but she was always hungry for a new friend. Maud welcomed the new minister’s company, and kept the conversation light. If she felt flattered—or interested—she didn’t let on, and that was a relief for Ewan Macdonald, who had just escaped a near marriage to an overeager woman in another town.
The Macneills had been staunch Presbyterians as far back as anyone could remember. Maud was the church organist; she was merry, she was bright, and she and Ewan had plenty to talk about. Ewan lingered as long as daylight held out; only when the kitchen grew dappled with shadows did he reluctantly leave with his letters. Maud picked up her notebook and carried it upstairs.

She had come to a bend in the road—though at that moment she could not see around it. It seemed merely the end of a vibrant June day. She had a new friend in town, and she had begun a new story. Maud had no way of knowing that absolutely everything in her life was about to change.
CHAPTER TWO

An Early Sorrow

Lucy Maud Montgomery—“call me Maud without an e,” she would insist, discarding the use of Lucy altogether—grew up proud of her long, deep roots in the history of Prince Edward Island.

On cold Canadian nights, the Macneill family gathered around the kitchen stove and talked. And talked. Little Maud sat at the knee of her great-aunt Mary Lawson, wide-eyed. Aunt Mary Lawson was a wonderful storyteller. Tales of ancient grudges, courtships, and adventures were discussed as eagerly as that morning’s gossip. Those old stories provided the first clues to Maud about who she came from, and who she might become. She never forgot
them. Maud came to know her Prince Edward Island ancestors as well as she knew her own neighbors.

In the 1700s Maud’s seasick great-great-grandmother Mary Montgomery came aground at Prince Edward Island for a few minutes’ relief, and then, to her husband’s horror, refused to board ship again. He could beg and plead and fume, but she would not budge. Right there on Prince Edward Island they would and did stay. Maud’s family history began on the heels of one stubborn, seasick, strong-willed woman.

The Montgomeries traced their lineage back to the Scottish Earl of Eglinton—a dubious connection, but one Maud’s father clung to. (He would one day name his own house Eglintoun Villa.) Maud’s paternal grandfather, Donald Montgomery, was a staunch Conservative. Among his friends he counted the first prime minister of Canada and leading members of the Conservative Party. Donald Montgomery served in the Prince Edward Island legislature for more than forty years and then in the Senate another twenty till his death at age eighty-six. He was known simply as “the Senator.”

The Senator kept on his mantel two large china dogs with green spots. According to Maud’s father, each midnight they would leap down from the shelf to the hearthrug. The story—and the spotted china dogs—enchanted little Maud. As patiently as she watched, she never caught them coming alive. But she never forgot
them, either. Years later, on her honeymoon, when she spied two large spotted china dogs for sale, she snapped them up and shipped them home to guard her bookcase. They were vivid, proud reminders of her father’s side of the family.

On Maud’s maternal side, the Macneills were equally well-known and respected—all of them dedicated Liberals, or Grits. This put them directly in political opposition to the Montgomerys. In this and in much else, Maud would find herself torn between two powerful and contradictory forces.

Maud’s maternal great-great-grandmother Elizabeth was as stubborn as the seasick one—but less successful at swaying her husband. She hated Prince Edward Island. “Bitterly homesick she was—rebelliously so. For weeks after her arrival she would not take off her bonnet, but walked the floor in it, imperiously demanding to be taken home. We children who heard the tale never wearied of speculating as to whether she took off her bonnet at night and put it on again in the morning, or whether she slept in it.”

Maud’s home village of Cavendish, on the central north coast of Prince Edward Island, was founded in the late 1700s by three Scottish families: the Macneills, the Simpsons, and the Clarks. By Maud’s day, she noted, these three important families “had intermarried to such an extent that it was necessary to be born or bred in
Cavendish in order to know whom it was safe to criticize.”

There was a tart local saying about these families: “From the conceit of the Simpsons, the pride of the Macneills, and the vain-glory of the Clarks good Lord deliver us.”

Maud came from the “proud” Macneills. She claimed that her “knack of writing . . . and literary tastes” sprang from this maternal side of the family. Her maternal great-grandfather, William Simpson Macneill, was a powerful Speaker of the House—it was said that he knew by name every man, woman, and child on Prince Edward Island. Even his portrait looked so formidable that one of his successors, still intimidated by it one hundred years later, finally had it taken down and hidden away.

One of the Speaker’s eleven children became a noted politician, another a well-known lawyer, but Alexander Macneill, Maud’s grandfather, was simply a farmer and the local postmaster. It was said he had possessed many of the Speaker’s best qualities—eloquence, dignity, intelligence—but also his weaknesses to a serious degree. Grandfather Macneill was proud, sharp-tongued, tyrannical, and hypersensitive. He picked fights with family and neighbors that turned into long-term feuds.

Undoubtedly Grandfather Macneill was proud of his clever granddaughter Maud, but his method was to praise in private and bully or ridicule in public. Maud had to learn from her cousins that her fierce grandfather whispered complimentary things behind her back.
She shrank from Grandfather Macneill’s razor wit. Maud hated the way he mocked and belittled her—and he couldn’t help doing it. Her most famous literary creation, Anne Shirley, shares her aversion: “sarcasm, in man or woman, was the one weapon Anne dreaded. It always hurt her . . . raised blisters on her soul that smarted for months.” Likewise, Maud’s fictional Story Girl vows never to make fun of a child: “. . . it IS hateful to be laughed at—and grown-ups always do it. I never will when I’m grown up. I’ll remember better.”

Maud was proud of her family, but her legacy was far from easy. Both sides were fully convinced of the rightness of their ways. Maud knew that she had inherited qualities from the Montgomerys and the Macneills destined to be forever at odds: “the passionate Montgomery blood and the Puritan Macneill conscience.” She also understood that neither side was “strong enough wholly to control the other.” The two sides battled it out endlessly in Maud’s double nature.

Maud put a brave face to the world, protecting and hiding the inner Maud. “I lived my double life, as it seems to me I have always done—as many people do, no doubt—the outward life of study and work . . . and the inner one of dreams and aspirations.”

Maud’s life began in joy but turned to early sorrow. Both the joy and the sorrow left their mark. Lucy Maud
Montgomery was born November 30, 1874, in the Prince Edward Island town of Clifton—later renamed New London—in a tiny two-floor cottage, eight and a half months after her parents’ wedding.

Her father, Hugh John Montgomery, was thirty-three years old, the handsome, merry, likable but unlucky son of Senator Donald Montgomery. When Hugh John first met Maud’s mother, Clara Woolner Macneill, he cut a dashing figure as a young sea captain. Ever the optimist, he swept all opposition aside to claim his young bride.

Clara Woolner Macneill was a young woman of twenty-one, the fourth of her parents’ six well-protected children. In the little village of Cavendish, Clara stood out. She turned heads with her beauty, and won more than one suitor’s heart. In later years, a gray-haired man approached Maud and shyly bragged that he had once had the honor of walking her mother home.

Clara and Hugh John were married in her parents’ parlor, but the elder Macneills never really approved the match. Hugh John seemed unlikely to become a good provider. Hugh John’s father, Senator Donald Montgomery, bought the young couple a small cottage on Prince Edward Island, halfway between the two sets of parents.

The young couple struggled to make a living by running a country store attached to their living quarters. Neither husband nor wife was good at business. The store floundered. And all too soon, Clara fell ill with
tuberculosis—or consumption, as it was then called—a slow, dreadful, and often fatal lung illness.

Hugh John moved to Cavendish, where the Macneills could help care for their daughter and infant granddaughter, Maud. Despite all their vigilance and attention, Clara Macneill Montgomery died on September 14, 1876, leaving behind one baby daughter and a grieving husband and family. She was twenty-three years old. Maud was not yet two. Her first memory was of her young mother lying in a coffin, her golden-brown hair spilling around her shoulders.

Hugh John stood by the casket, cradling Maud in his arms and crying. The tiny girl was bewildered: a crowd had gathered, she was the center of attention, yet something was wrong. Neighbors whispered to one another and looked at them pityingly.

Women in Maud’s day owned only one silk dress in their lifetime, usually in some sensible, muted color; Clara’s silk was a vivid green. Maud’s mother looked glamorous even in death. With her mass of wavy golden-brown hair, she seemed as lovely and familiar as ever. But when Maud reached out to touch her mother’s face, she was shocked by her ice-cold skin, a sensation so strong that years later Maud could feel it searing her fingertips.

After the funeral, a veil of silence fell over Clara Macneill Montgomery’s brief life. Maud had to cobble together an image of her mother through snatches of
overheard conversation and dropped hints. It was as if her mother had been erased.

From the few accounts Maud could glean, Clara had been a sensitive, poetical, high-minded, and dreamy young woman. It took courage for her to defy her parents and marry against their wishes. Maud and Clara stood out from their little clan. Both loved beauty to a degree that was considered almost madness. Maud forever mourned the loss of her mother. Though Clara died young and unknown, she left behind a few items that Maud treasured all her life—a few volumes of poetry, a daybook that Maud carefully preserved.

Clara’s grave lay just across the road from Maud’s house and the Presbyterian Church, beside the schoolhouse. Her mother’s absence was always in sight: aching, mysterious, and unforgettable. Maud crossed through her mother’s graveyard on her way to and from school each day.

Clara’s early death left Maud with unanswered questions. Though the Macneill family was famous for storytelling, no stories about her mother came Maud’s way. Nor did anyone sit down with Maud to discuss a possible afterlife. She was left to draw her own conclusions.

At age four, Maud was in church when the minister said something that made her sit up and take notice. One was never supposed to speak in church, of course, but this
was urgent. Maud turned to her aunt Emily and piped, “Where is Heaven?”

Young Aunt Emily was too proper to answer aloud. Instead she pointed her finger up toward the ceiling. From this gesture, Maud concluded that her mother was somehow stuck in the attic of the Clifton church. Heaven was only a few miles from home! Maud could not understand why someone didn’t get a ladder and fetch her mother down.

Meanwhile, Maud’s home life with her father grew more insecure. Hugh John grieved for his young wife, and as he struggled to make a living, he left the care of his active young daughter to the Macneills, who were in their fifties, well past their years of child rearing. Only their teenage daughter, Maud’s prim aunt Emily, still lived at home. Maud thought of her young aunt as ancient. “Either you were a grown-up or you were not, that was all there was about it.” Aunt Emily was no sort of playmate, so Maud invented her own playfellows, even in the glass doors of a cupboard in her grandparents’ parlor.

In the left-hand door dwelled Maud’s imaginary friend, Katie Maurice. Katie was a little girl Maud’s own age, to whom she would chatter “for hours, giving and receiving confidences.” Maud could never poke her head into the parlor without at least waving her hand at Katie Maurice.

On the right side of the cupboard door lived the
imaginary Lucy Gray, an elderly widow who always told “dismal stories of her troubles.” Maud much preferred the imaginary company of Katie Maurice, but in order to spare the feelings of the sad old widow, she was careful to spend equal time chatting to both.

Much later, Maud would bring just the favorite of her two invented friends to *Anne of Green Gables*, where Katie Maurice became Anne’s imaginary first best friend and comforter.

The real-life companion of Maud’s earliest childhood was her father, Hugh John. Maud worshipped him. He was gentle and merry, and he told delightful stories — like the one about his father’s spotted china dogs coming to life at midnight. Maud’s father praised and petted her and, unlike the Macneills, expressed himself in ways that were openly affectionate. Hugh John called her his “little Maudie,” and in return she loved him unconditionally.

Years later she wrote, “I loved my father very very deeply. He was the most lovable man I ever knew.” Hugh John Montgomery was childlike in his aversion to unpleasantness. Father and daughter clung to each other in a bewildering world. In her journal entry of May 3, 1908, she wrote,

> I think now that grandfather and grandmother resented this very love of mine for him. They saw that I did not turn to them with the outgush of affection I gave him.
And it was true—I did not. But it was their own fault. I know now that they loved me after a fashion. But they never expressed or showed that love in word or action. I never thought they loved me. I felt that the only person in the world who loved me was father. Nobody else ever kissed and caressed me and called me pet names. So I gave all my love to him in those years. And my grandparents did not like it. They thought that, as they were giving me a home and food and clothes and care that I ought to have loved them best.

Little Maud was a moody, active, clever, and excitable child. None of these qualities were valued by the stern Macneills. Maud yearned for open expressions of tenderness—as when a family friend, looking in on her one night, murmured, “dear little child,” a phrase Maud remembered and cherished all her life. Displays of overt affection like these were rare. “And I loved such expression. I craved it. I have never forgotten it.”

There is no doubt that Maud’s grandmother loved her. Lucy Macneill was the central figure in Maud’s life. Grandmother Macneill stood up to her husband on Maud’s behalf, defied convention for her granddaughter’s sake, spent her own pocket money for Maud’s benefit, and fought to make sure the girl got a good education. She did all these things at a time when such behavior was the exception, not the rule. Lucy Macneill took excellent care
of Maud materially—she was a famed housekeeper with skills at cooking, cleaning, and handicrafts—but emotionally and intellectually they remained miles apart.

It was as difficult for Grandmother Macneill as it was natural for Hugh John to openly express affection. But while Maud easily forgave her father many failings, she judged her grandmother harshly. Only in fiction, in the much-altered character of Marilla Cuthbert, did Maud ever celebrate her grandmother’s good qualities: her reliability, self-sacrifice, her steadfast attention.

There is a little-known episode in Maud’s early childhood, touched on in her Autobiographical Sketches, that suggests that once upon a time, Grandmother Macneill did hold a treasured place in her heart. At age five Maud burned herself with a poker, and the next day fell ill with typhoid fever. The doctor declared she would not survive the week. Grandmother Macneill was summoned at once.

The high-strung little girl threw herself at her grandmother. In fact, Maud was “so delighted to see her that the excitement increased my fever to an alarming pitch.” In an effort to calm his daughter, Hugh John fibbed that her grandmother had gone home, and over the next feverish days Maud believed that the elderly woman hovering anxiously was not her grandmother at all, but one of the housekeepers. Only when she was well enough to sit up by herself did she see that Grandmother Lucy Macneill
remained at her side. Maud wrote, “I . . . could not bear to be out of her arms. I kept stroking her face constantly and saying in amazement and delight, ‘Why you’re not Mrs. Murphy, after all; you are Grandma.’”

Not long after Maud’s bout with typhoid fever, Grandmother Lucy Macneill became the little girl’s chief caretaker. Grandmother was stern and rule-bound. Her child-rearing techniques seemed to Maud hopelessly old-fashioned. Over the next few years all the burden of parenting fell upon Grandmother Macneill. Hugh John ventured farther and farther afield into Western Canada in search of business. The once-adoring relationship vanished without a trace.

At first Hugh John made visits home to see his little daughter. But by the time Maud turned seven, her father had moved to far-off Saskatchewan, and the elderly Macneills had taken on the full care of their granddaughter.

Maud hid the shock and disappointment of her father’s abandonment and redirected her rage where it could safely rest, with her ever-vigilant, elderly grandparents. Not then or later did Maud utter a word against her “darling” father, Hugh John. Quite the opposite—she created a loving portrait of the absent father that has bewildered every biographer.

It didn’t help that prickly Grandfather Macneill openly opposed the new childcare arrangement, or that he was
so often at odds with his talkative, temperamental granddaughter. Alexander Macneill shrank from the world; Maud craved sociability. He scorned her flights of imagination, scoffed at her ambitions, and insisted a woman’s place was in the home.

Grandmother Lucy Macneill, caught between these two strong personalities, had to play the peacemaker—she worked hard to restore order and balance to her granddaughter’s life. Trying to play fair, she pleased neither.

Maud knew that her grandmother meant well, “but her love never had the slightest saving grace of understanding,” and so, she once wrote, “had no power to draw us together.” Maud had been orphaned by one parent and abandoned by the other. Another child might have been farmed out to foster care, shuttled from house to house, or sent to an orphanage, but Maud had a secure roof over her head, plenty of good food, all the material advantages at her grandparents’ disposal.

The Macneills’ house was one of the nicest old homes in Cavendish. Cherry and apple orchards bloomed each June, and the fruit ripened each fall. The other children brought their simple lunches to school in tin pails; Maud came home at noon and dined with her grandparents. Many children could not afford shoes even in the harsh Canadian winter; Maud wore sturdy leather boots that were the envy of all the other girls. Maud admitted,
“Materially, I was well cared for . . . It was emotionally and socially that my nature was starved and restricted.”

Maud’s relatives constantly reminded her that she should be grateful for her good fortune. She was a charity case. She should act thankful for the roof over her head. Nothing Maud did escaped public notice, and more would be expected of her than of any mere mortal.
CHAPTER THREE

“Very Near to a Kingdom of Ideal Beauty”

The Macneill farm sat just outside the limits of Cavendish, a seaside village of close-knit connections. The whole settlement was about three miles long and one mile wide. Cavendish lay on the rural north shore of Prince Edward Island, eleven miles from a railway station and twenty-four miles from Charlottetown. Maud considered Cavendish the most beautiful place on earth. In one rare case of understatement she called it “a good place in which to spend a childhood. I can think of none better.”

In an early diary entry, Maud noted,

Away down beyond the brown fields lay the sea, blue and sparkling, dotted by crests of foam. The walk in
the fresh moist spring air was lovely and when I got down to the shore and climbed out on a big rock I just held my breath with delight. . . . To my left extended the shining curve of the sand shore; and on my right were rugged rocks with little coves, where the waves swished on the pebbles. I could have lingered there for hours and watched the sea with the gulls soaring over it.

One can hear in the voice of the teenage Maud the stirrings of the brilliant descriptive writer that she would become.

Maud was fiercely passionate about Cavendish, her childhood home base. However much she might privately criticize the village, she never let an outsider say a word against it. No place was harder to leave. None moved her so powerfully. “It is and ever must be hallowed ground to me,” she declared. Maud knew each field and hill, the fruit orchards, groves from which the children would gather chews of spicy spruce gum. “I was very near to a kingdom of ideal beauty,” she claimed.

During Maud’s youth, Prince Edward Island was a tightly knit place, home to one hundred thousand people. It was the smallest of Canada’s provinces, an outlying region glimmering off the eastern shore of New Brunswick. As far as Maud was concerned, Prince Edward Island remained “the most beautiful place in America.”

Very rarely as a young child did Maud ever venture
beyond the outskirts of tiny Cavendish. Her grandparents were dedicated homebodies, and over the years they withdrew still more. A trip to Charlottetown, less than twenty-five miles away, “was a very rare treat, once in three years, and loomed up in about the same proportions of novelty, excitement, and delight as a trip to Europe would now.”

It was on one such rare trip to Charlottetown that the four-year-old Maud managed to escape her grandparents for a few minutes. While Grandmother and Grandfather Macneill engaged in conversation, Maud seized her chance to explore the street alone. She was amazed to see a woman shaking out her rugs from “the top of a house.” She chatted briefly with a strange girl with black eyes and black braids and felt she had had an extraordinary adventure.

Family visits to Maud’s uncle John’s and aunt Annie Campbell’s house at nearby Park Corner happened perhaps once or twice in a year. These visits, too, Maud treasured as a welcome escape from the dour Macneill home. Maud found her first companionship at Park Corner. Here lived a “trio of merry cousins,” including her younger cousin Frede Campbell, who later became Maud’s closest friend, “my more than sister, the woman who was nearest and dearest to me in the world!”

There was no stiffness or formality at Park Corner, where the “heart-hungry” girl found warmth and laughter, and creature comforts—including “a famous old pantry, always stored with goodies” the cousins would raid
at night, devouring “unholy snacks with sounds of riot and mirth.” The big white house charmed Maud, with its nooks and cupboards and “unexpected flights of stairs.” The Campbell cousins stayed awake till all hours, playing games, cracking nuts, telling jokes and stories. Uncle John and Aunt Annie joined in the merriment. Maud wrote, “I love the old spot better than any place on earth.”

Maud’s joy was nourished at lively Park Corner, but her soul was forged in the quiet sobriety of the Macneill homestead in Cavendish. It remained her house of dreams, her measure for all else. “Were it not for those Cavendish years . . . I do not think Anne of Green Gables would ever have been written,” she declared. Her childhood home brought a checkered happiness, to be sure, but she clung to it passionately. “The only home my inmost soul would ever acknowledge would be that little country settlement by the gulf shore. . . .”

Maud had a fierce determination to be happy, even as a child who had tasted tragedy young. She loved to laugh and be “merry”—one of her favorite words. She had a genius for finding the fun in every situation. When there was no human company, she invented it—in the form of her imaginary friends, and in the natural beauty all around her. She was especially fond of trees, and gifted them with names and personalities. “If I believe seriously in the doctrine of transmigration,” she once wrote to a friend,
“I should think I had been a tree in some previous stage of existence.”

“I like things to have handles,” she admitted—even something as humble as a potted geranium. Like her famous heroine Anne, Maud named every loved object from earliest childhood. She gave the trees in her grandparents’ yard fanciful names: Little Syrup, the White Lady, the Monarch of the Forest. At times her vivid imagination ran away with her: a scalloped glass vase seemed to have a terrifying expression, and Maud once fancied all the chairs in her grandmother’s dim parlor were dancing around the table making faces at her.

Maud had cats for company as well. All her life she owned at least one. Later, she autographed her books with a drawing of a black cat underneath her signature. “You are never poor,” she declared, “as long as you’ve got something to love.” When she wasn’t busy with imaginary friends, Maud played with her kittens. Her first two cats were Pussywillow and Catkins. When Pussywillow was a kitten she ate some rat poison and died. Five-year-old Maud was heartbroken; her grandparents could not understand the little girl’s wild grief. At that moment, suffering and death became real for Maud. Maud wrote that she had been “a happy, unconscious little animal. From that time I began to have a soul.”

By the time Maud entered the local one-room
schoolhouse at age six, she had mastered two accomplishments. She could wiggle her ears, and she could read. There is no record of how the schoolmaster regarded the first trick, but he was clearly impressed by the second. He marched Maud to the front of the classroom and admonished the older children, “This little girl is much younger than you and already she can read better than any of you.”

But her pride was quickly thrown down. On her second day of school, she arrived late and had to enter the schoolroom alone. She was keenly aware of everyone staring. “Very shyly I slipped in and sat down beside a ‘big girl.’ At once a wave of laughter rippled over the room. I had come in with my hat on.” Even writing about it forty years later, “the fearful shame and humiliation I endured at that moment rushes over me again. I felt that I was a target for the ridicule of the universe. Never, I felt certain, could I live down such a dreadful mistake. I crept out to take off my hat, a crushed morsel of humanity.”

Nor was this the last time that Maud would feel publicly humiliated.

*I remember one winter I was sent to school wearing a new style of apron. I think still that it was rather ugly. Then I thought it was hideous. It was a long, sack-like garment, with sleeves. Nobody in school had ever*
worn aprons with sleeves before. . . . One of the girls sneeringly remarked that they were baby aprons. This capped all! . . . To the end of their existence, and they did wear horribly well, those “baby” aprons marked for me the extreme limit of human endurance.

Readers of Anne of Green Gables will remember Anne’s desperate desire to look fashionable and to wear great “puffed sleeves” like the other girls. Here, as in so much of her work, Maud could draw from the details of her life, turn them upside down (from having to wear “baby sleeves” to longing for puffed sleeves), and invest them with humor and pathos. She never lost her keen sense of the pangs of childhood, later observing in Anne of Windy Poplars, “Isn’t it queer that the things we writhe over at night are seldom wicked things? Just humiliating ones.”

The one-room Cavendish school was tiny by modern standards. Even the schoolteacher stayed the same from year to year. A newcomer provided an exciting change of pace. Maud once “bought” the rights to sit beside a new girl in school. The cost for a new seatmate was four juicy apples from her grandfather’s orchard. Maud considered this trade a bargain. It turned out that the new pupil was Amanda Macneill, a distant relation known as Mollie, who soon became Maud’s best childhood friend.

Maud and Mollie were known as a single entity,
Mollie-and-Polly. The two little girls’ personalities complemented each other. Maud was intellectual, strong-willed, and high-strung. Mollie was sweet-natured, kind, and easygoing—as gentle as Maud was fierce. Together they made mischief at school, formed clubs with other girls, shared the secrets of their first romances, and clung together through every childhood storm.

Though Maud seldom admired her Cavendish schoolmasters, she was eager to learn, and could never get enough of books. The setting of the school was a great part of its charm for the girl who spent much of her time gazing out the window. To the west and south spread an old spruce grove, where the children wandered freely at lunchtime and picked chews of gum. “I shall always be thankful that my school was near a grove—a place with winding paths and treasure-trove of ferns and mosses and wood-flowers. It was a stronger and better educative influence in my life than the lessons learned at the desk in the school-house.”

Teachers, Maud found, were often strict when they should have been kind, and careless when they should have been firm. If the schoolmaster thought you knew the answer, he wouldn’t call on you. If he sensed you were unprepared, he’d pounce. Maud learned to look reluctant when she really wanted to be called on and knowledgeable when lost.

* * *
Maud longed to bring a lunch pail to school and eat with her school chums, and to run barefoot with the poorer children. Maud felt like an outsider. An orphan—even a semi-orphan like Maud—was an object of general pity, scorn, and distrust. Sometimes she acted superior, but deep down Maud feared she must be unlikable. “I received an impression . . . that everybody disliked me and that I was a very hateful person.” She was cleverer, better fed, and better dressed than many of her school chums—and lonelier.

Maud’s desires and ambitions seemed suspect to her neighbors and relations. What did she want? What was she up to now? There was money in the Macneill household for leather boots, but little spared for the books Maud craved. Magazines came her way now and then by way of her grandparents’ post office, and the beauty-hungry Maud would pore over those fashion magazines for hours.

Browsing in the sparse Macneill home library, Maud devoured the *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and a two-volume red-clothed *History of the World*. Hans Christian Andersen’s tales provided “a perpetual joy.” But fiction in general was frowned upon as reading material for children. Her grandparents owned only a handful of novels, including Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers*, Sir Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy*, and Bulwer-Lytton’s *Zanoni*. Little Maud read these precious, scant volumes so often that before she turned seven she claimed she had memorized entire chapters by heart.
Luckily, Maud was allowed a good deal of poetry: Shakespeare, Longfellow, Tennyson, Whittier, Scott, Milton, and Burns. But on Sundays even poetry was banned. The only permissible books, besides sermons, were religious tomes.

Maud’s favorite among these was a thin, preachy volume called *A Memoir of Anzonetta R. Peters*, about a sickly girl who dies young, speaking only from scriptures and hymns. To imitate her, Maud wrote “hymn after hymn” in her diary, and patterned her own style on Anzonetta’s remarks. Maud wrote that she wished she were “in Heaven now, with Mother . . . and Anzonetta R. Peters.” In fact, she “didn’t really wish it. I only thought I ought to.” Maud tried imitating Anzonetta for a while, but soon gave it up. Anzonetta was voiceless — she spoke only through sacred texts. And Maud knew early on that she longed to express herself through writing. “I cannot remember the time when I was not writing, or when I did not mean to be an author.”

Maud’s artistic dreams would have been enough to brand her an oddity in Cavendish. Well-bred girls became housekeepers, not artists. They were wives and mothers, or at most they took a turn at being teachers and shopkeepers from financial necessity. They did not set their hearts on anything as frivolous as writing books.

Her relatives and neighbors might have looked more
kindly on Maud’s ambitions had she set out to become a minister’s wife. There, her intelligence and bookishness could have seemed an asset. But Maud decided early that she was unsuited to any formal religious life. She associated religion with grim fear and long lists of rules.

Maud was raised within the Scottish Presbyterian Church, the church of her ancestors. In the 1870s and 1880s, there were about thirty thousand Presbyterians on Prince Edward Island, and only five thousand High Church Anglicans. Any other religion was virtually unknown. Maud was subjected to terrifying fire-and-brimstone sermons, and so “suffered from spasms of fear about Hell.” In the summer Maud’s mind remained untroubled. But in the depths of winter, she would undergo fits of dread, and then deprive herself of even simple pleasures. She’d set the supper table giving herself a particular piece of bent silverware that she detested. To the elegance-loving Maud, this was heavy penance indeed.

A photograph of Maud taken around this time shows an otherworldly-looking girl, thin and pale, with a small mouth and enormous, sad eyes. When Maud was six, her grandmother saw in the newspaper a prediction that the world was going to end the following Sunday. Maud maintained a young child’s “pathetic faith in the wisdom of grown-ups.” When her grandmother read the dire prediction aloud, Maud was terror-stricken. Grown-ups never
lied. The newspaper never lied. Try as she might, she could not stop worrying about it.

Maud held “a most absolute and piteous belief in everything that was ‘printed.’” If a thing was written down and published it must be true. All week she badgered her aunt Emily, asking piteously if they would be going to church that Sunday. Stiffly, Aunt Emily assured Maud that they would. That “was a considerable comfort. . . . If she really expected that there would be Sunday-school she could not believe that the next day would see the end of the world.”

When Maud turned seven, her grandparents threw one final public celebration at home, their last hurrah before withdrawing from Cavendish society. It was the wedding of Aunt Emily, their youngest daughter. Maud remembered the event vividly, with everyone present from both sides of her family. She memorized every detail, as if knowing it was the last glimpse of something precious.

Aunt Emily’s brown silk wedding dress featured pleats and flounces and ruches and an overskirt. The bride wore a bonnet, too—jet-black with a white feather. There was dancing and feasting. Maud remembered her uncle John Montgomery keeping things lively, and it all stayed clear in her mind, because it was the last time happy crowds gathered in the old homestead. Once Aunt Emily left as a bride, the Macneills retired from society—and seven-year-old Maud was forced to retire along with them.