

## O'Shaughnessy Outtakes

When Harold Thorpe set out to fictionalize his mother's memoir, he originally envisioned one book. It was ultimately split into the two *O'Shaughnessy Chronicles* novels -- *Giddyap Tin Lizzie* and *Bittersweet Harvest*. In both published novels, the story is told through the eyes of Will O'Shaughnessy. Removed in the editing process was a second point of view, that of Will's daughter, Catherine. Those unpublished outtakes, seen through Catherine's eyes, are offered here for the first time. They are sure to be treasured by O'Shaughnessy Chronicles fans! Over the next few months, in serial format, we'll regularly post more outtakes on Harold's website. We hope you enjoy them all!

### Planting Potatoes

May, 1935

I remember Sharon racing through the kitchen in tears. "Sharon, what's the matter? What's wrong?"

She didn't stop or reply; instead, she rushed up the back stairs.

Our kitchen was big and everything was in place. Mother saw to that, but Sharon helped lots. Sharon deserved a new dress, I thought. She worked hard for the family. And Dad had promised her that dress, but when Earnest O'Doul said he needed medicine for his daughter who had the croup, Dad said he'd wait until next month for the money owed him. During these Depression years few people had money to spend on their cars, and Dad didn't press too hard when he knew they were desperate.

I followed Sharon to her bedroom. I seldom saw my cheerful sister cry. "What's the matter? Please tell me. Maybe I can help."

"Oh, dear Catherine," Sharon said, "you can't help, not unless you have a treasure secreted away someplace."

"Is it the dress?"

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“I’ve not had a new dress since confirmation. I so wanted one for the school’s Spring Ball. My confirmation dress is way too small. I’ve grown this last year — at the top, you know.”

“Mama’ll alter it. She’s good at that. It’ll almost be new.”

“Not to me it won’t,” Sharon said as she broke into tears once more.

The next morning before church, I told Ruby about the dress, about the broken promise. Ruby didn’t respond at first; she paced our bedroom with her head down in thought. “There must be something we can do.”

I knew that Sharon would help Ruby or me if we had a problem. Why, Sharon saved my skin many a time. I decided to pray about it during the minister’s minute of silence.

When, two days later, Cousin Joe said he wanted our help planting potatoes and offered a penny a sprout, I knew my prayers were answered. This time I’d help Sharon. My father’s cousin Joe owned two acres on the edge of town in which he planted potatoes. Usually he hired our older cousins to help, but this year, their father said he needed them at home. And it was a late spring, so Cousin Joe wanted the sprouts planted soon.

Mother said that we could miss one day of school, but no more. If we didn’t finish on Wednesday, we’d have to work after school on Thursday and Friday. So we’d have to work fast. Sharon’s ball was Saturday night.

The day was hot (over ninety degrees, a record temperature for so early in the season), but I was eager and used to work, so I was certain we could earn enough to buy the dress. We’d never planted that many potatoes, but after careful calculation, Ruby said

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we could earn fifty cents an hour between us, maybe more. If we worked ten hours, we could earn five dollars, more than we'd ever earned before.

The flat, lightly tilled field stretched out before us. Cousin Joe marked the rows with long strands of binder twine. He pulled a hay wagon loaded with bushel baskets to the fence line and left an eight-gallon milk can of cold water in the wagon's shade. The baskets were nearly overflowing with sprouts.

We each grabbed a pail and filled it with sprouts. I started up one row, Ruby another. At first, we worked fast, and I calculated pennies as I dug, set the sprout, and covered it with cool, loose soil. The first hour, we made our fifty cents, each burying twenty-five sprouts. But the farther we went up the field, the longer it took to run back and fill our pails. And the higher the sun got in the sky, the more often we returned for a cold drink of water. Soon we spent half of our time running, and our production dipped sharply.

We dug faster, but that tired us more quickly, so we worked slower. And to make matters worse, the now-hard soil, baked by the sun, made digging more difficult. By noon, I was worn to a frazzle, and my hopes for a five-dollar payday waned. For a while I sat eating my lunch in silence, too hot and tired to talk. Then, after ten minutes, I rolled over to face Ruby. "Maybe we should be satisfied with less. We'll never get them all planted. I'm beat."

"We'll get that five dollars one way or another," Ruby said. "I'll figure it out, just you see."

"We don't have to finish today," I said. "Cousin Joe said we have all week."

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“We’ll finish today.” Ruby took a swallow from the dipper and flung the remaining water at my feet. “We’ll finish today or my name’s not Ruby O’Shaughnessy. I promised Carrie that I’d go to the town hall concert after school tomorrow and to our class party Friday night, and I don’t plan to miss them. We’ll finish these potatoes today.”

I knew that Ruby seldom failed when she set her mind to it. I was sure we’d finish planting today, but I didn’t know how.

After lunch and a short rest, we attacked the firmly packed soil with renewed vigor, and again, we made fifty cents the first hour. Ruby said, “I told you we’d finish.”

But soon it became clear that Ruby hadn’t accounted for the afternoon sun. My blouse and slacks hung heavier with each trip I made up the field. Again, I slowed as I recognized the futility of our effort. We’d never earn enough money today.

Ruby called to me. “Don’t be so lazy. There’s a ton of potatoes left in the wagon.” She filled her pail and raced up the row, but I lagged behind.

We worked a while longer but continued to lose ground toward our five dollar payday. I didn’t mind work. It was a part of my young life, but the heat became too much. We’d never get enough money to help Sharon. Even under Ruby’s stern glare, I slowed to a halt. Finally, I crawled under the wagon and rested in the shade. My back ached and my fingers throbbed with pain.

“I thought you cared for Sharon,” Ruby shouted as she worked on, but after another half an hour, she joined me under the wagon. “Wow, that sun’s hot,” she said as she took a mouthful of lukewarm water from the dipper. “I’ve never been so tired.”

Ruby sat but remained quiet. I could see that she was deep in thought, so I turned away and laid my head on the ground, certain the sun had won the day. But I'd underestimated Ruby. After a while, Ruby stood and said, "Fill your pail."

I jerked upright. "What?"

"I said, fill your pail."

"Ruby, I can't plant another potato. I'll come back alone tomorrow if I must, but I'll die if I have to plant more today. I'll never get out of bed in the morning."

"Just do as I say," Ruby said as she slammed sprouts into her bucket. "Fill your pail."

I eased off the ground and began to drop potato sprouts into my pail, one at a time. "I can't do this, Ruby. You'll kill me. You'll not have a sister to love you anymore. No one to boss you around." As if I ever did the bossing.

"Oh, shut up, you silly. You'll survive, and we'll get our five dollars. I have a plan."

I dropped a sprout onto the bucket's rim, and, as it bounced to the ground, I glared at Ruby. I knew about Ruby's plans, and most of them got me into trouble. "What are you thinking?"

"Just fill your pail and follow me."

Ruby grabbed her full pail and headed across the field, past the rows marked by twine to the far side, where trees and brambles thrived in the sunlight. At first I hesitated, but then I slowly followed. What did my scheming sister have in mind?

Ruby walked into the woods but stopped by a downed tree. "When we planted the first row today, I noticed this hollow trunk. Do you understand my plan now, sis?"

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A hollow log. How could that help? “What are you thinking?”

Ruby didn't answer. She walked to the empty trunk, took a handful of sprouts from her pail, and shoved them inside. “We'll plant these potatoes today even if it's in an old log. Maybe they'll grow like mushrooms. They grow mushrooms in logs, you know.”

At first, I stood open-mouthed. “We can't do that. It's cheating. It's dishonest.” I took a step toward the wagon but turned back. “I couldn't cheat Cousin Joe. Ruby, I'm ashamed of you.”

Ruby grabbed my arm with one hand while she wrenched my pail away with the other. “We worked hard today, Cathy. Cousin Joe would agree with that.” She pushed more sprouts into the log. “The working conditions were more severe than we bargained for. You've heard Dad say that wages increase when conditions are harsh.” She pushed another handful into the cavity. “We deserve more under these conditions, and this is a way of getting more. You've read how much steel workers make because they spend all day in front of those hot blast furnaces. It really is fair, sis.”

I hadn't thought about it that way. Maybe it did make sense, but if it was fair, we should tell Cousin Joe. When I suggested that to Ruby, she was emphatic. “Oh, no! He might not see it that way. He doesn't have the education or experience with labor that Dad has. We'd best just do it and say nothing. It's okay, Cathy. It really is fair.”

I wasn't so sure. I thought that maybe we should tell Dad, but I didn't mention that to Ruby. “I don't know. You're probably right about working conditions, but it doesn't seem fair to not plant Cousin Joe's sprouts. He'll not get all the potatoes he expects when he digs them this fall.”

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“That’s a long time from now. Besides, Cousin Joe really likes Sharon. He’d want to help her get a dress.”

Yes, it’s true, he was fond of Sharon. But I knew we’d not be knocking on Cousin Joe’s door anytime soon telling about his contribution to Sharon’s dress fund. I should have known better, but Ruby said it was okay.