

THE LAKE EFFECT EXPRESS

August 1958

“Good News from Good Hart!”
by Shirley Ann Potter

It was the spit heard 'round the world!

Our town is still atwitter over the news that the daughter of Mr. Peter Jackson was crowned the 35th Annual Cherry Pit Spittin' Champion of Leelanau and Emmet County last Saturday. Fifteen-year-old Mary Jackson, an Emmet County high-school sophomore, was not only the first woman—uh, girl—to win the contest, but her stone flew a *Guinness Book of World Records*-breaking distance of ninety-three feet six-and-a-half inches, shattering the previous record set by “Too Tall” Fred Jones in 1898 at the state's very first Cherry Championship right here in Good Hart.

News of her accomplishment has flown farther than her cherry pit, with reporters from as far away as New York and London anointing our town sprite with the moniker “Cherry Mary.”

I caught up with Mary at the Very Cherry General Store—our beloved post office/grocery store/sandwich-and-soda-shop run by Mary's mother and grandmother—to see how she managed such a Herculean feat.

“My mom taught me to whistle when I was a kid (*“A kid!” Don't you just love that, readers?*), and I had to be loud enough for her to hear me when she was down at the lake. I think that made my lips strong,” Mary says. “And I started eating sunflower seeds when I was fishing on the boat with my grandma. She taught me how to spit them without having the wind blow them back in the boat.”

Mary says she practiced for the contest by standing in the middle of M-119—the road that houses our beautiful Tunnel of Trees—and spitting stones into the wind when a storm was brewing on Lake Michigan.

“I knew if I could make it a far piece into the wind, I could do it when it was still.”

While her grandmother was “over the moon” for Mary's feat, saying, “It's about time,” Mr. Jackson says of his daughter's accomplishment, “It's certainly unusual for a girl, but Mary isn't your average girl. Maybe all this got it out of her system, so to speak. I hope so for her sake.”

The plucky teenager seems nonplussed by the attention, despite seeing her face all over northern Michigan in the papers and the T-shirts featuring her face—cheeks puffed, stone leaving her mouth—and the words *Cherry Mary* in bright red over the image.

“A girl can do anything a man can,” Mary says in between retrieving mail, spreading mayonnaise on a tomato sandwich and twirling a cherry around in her mouth, before perfectly depositing the stone in a trash can across the room. “You just gotta believe you can. That's the hard part. Harder than spitting any old pit.”

Mary seems ready to conquer the world, readers. Cheers, Cherry Mary! Our hometown heroine!

PART ONE

“You can’t pick cherries with your back to the tree.”

—J.P. Morgan

Becky

June 2023

“Okay, Benjie, would you like it if Ashley did this to you?”

He scrunches up his face to stave off tears and shakes his head. “No.”

“Well, it’s not a nice thing to do.”

I study Ashley’s hair, then take her face in my hands. “It’s going to be okay. Trust me?”

The little girl nods her head. I give her a hug.

I walk over to my desk and open the bottom drawer . There is a large jar of creamy peanut butter sitting next to a bag of mini Snickers. The peanut butter is for emergencies like this: removing gum from a little girls’ hair. The Snickers are for me after I’m finished with this life lesson.

“Well, I’m just glad neither of you are allergic to peanuts,” I say. “Allows me to do this.”

I cover the gum stuck in the back of Ashley’s pretty, long, blond hair and then look at her.

“I promise this works,” I say. “I’ve performed a lot of gum surgery.”

She nods. Her eyes are red from crying, her cheeks blotchy.

“Why did you do this, Benjie?” I ask the little boy seated in the chair before my desk.

He ducks his head sheepishly, his brown bangs falling into his eyes, and murmurs something into his chest.

“I didn’t catch that,” I say. “What did you say? Remember it’s okay to express your emotions.”

He looks at me, freckles twitching on his cheeks. “I can’t say,” he whispers.

“Yes, you can,” I say. “Don’t make this any worse than it already is.”

Benjie glances toward the door to ensure that it is closed. “Tyler Evans told me to do it or he’d punch me on the way home.”

Being a grade-school administrator is akin to being a detective: you have to work the perp to get the truth. Eventually—no matter the age—they break, especially when a verdict on punishment is waiting in the balance.

It’s the last day of school. Benjie does not want his summer to be ruined.

I lean down and slide the gum out of Ashley’s hair. I go to my sink, dampen a cloth and put some dish soap on it, return and clean the rest of the peanut butter off her locks. I move to a tall filing cabinet and retrieve a clean brush. The filing cabinet is filled with bags of sealed brushes and combs, toothbrushes and EpiPens, certificates and old laptops. I run the brush through her hair. I hold up a mirror for her to see the back of her head.

“See, good as new.”

“What do you say to Ashley, Benjie?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you accept his apology?”

Ashley shakes her head no. “You ruined the last day of school. You’re a big ol’ meanie.”

“Ashley,” I say, my tone sweet but authoritarian.

“I accept your apology,” she says.

“You’re free to go,” I say to her.

“But you’re still a big ol’ poop head,” she says, racing out of my office, bubblegum-free hair bouncing.

I actually have to clench my hands very hard to stifle a laugh.

Big ol' poop head.

How many times a day would I—would any adult—like to scream that at someone?

“Are you telling my parents?” Benjie asks.

“I have to,” I say, “but I’ll tell them *why* you did it, and then I’ll have a talk with Tyler.”

“No!”

“I have to do that, too,” I explain. “And I’ll talk to his parents as well.”

He looks at me, his chin quivering.

“We have a zero-tolerance policy here for bullying,” I say. “Trust me, Tyler won’t do it again. You have to stand up to bullies. You have to show them the right way to do things. Otherwise, they never change.”

In addition to being a detective, an assistant principal is also akin to being the vice-president of the United States. Everyone knows your name, everyone knows you’ve achieved some level of status, but nobody really understands what the hell you do all day.

“I promise it will be okay,” I say. “Just promise me you won’t do it again. You’re a nice boy, Benjie. That’s a wonderful thing. Always remember that.”

“I promise.” He looks at me. “Can I go now?”

“One more thing. You know you aren’t supposed to bring gum to school.”

“I know. But one of the moms was handing it out before school.”

Mrs. Yates, I instantly know. She wants to be the cool mom. She’s Room Mom for 2A, and, *Mrs. Trimbley*, the Room Mom for 2B, told me that competing with her this year was like being a contestant in *Squid Game*.

Benjie continues. “It’s Bubble Yum. My favorite. My mom won’t let me have it because it’s bad for my teeth.”

Benjie opens his mouth and smiles. He resembles a jack-o’-lantern. He’s missing teeth here and there, willy-nilly, black holes where baby teeth once lived and adult teeth will soon reside.

Too late, I want to say to Benjie, but he won’t get my humor. Only my best friend, Q, understands it, and my grandparents who made me this way.

I think of how much I loved chewing gum as a kid.

“Do you have any more?”

“Am I going to get in trouble again?”

“No,” I say with a laugh.

He reaches into the pocket of his little jeans and hands me a piece of grape Bubble Yum.

My favorite.

“Do you know what my teacher used to say when I’d sneak gum into class?”

“You snuck gum into class?”

He stares at me with more admiration than if Albert Pujols from the St. Louis Cardinals suddenly appeared with an autographed baseball.

“I did,” I say. “It was about the only bad thing I ever did. My teacher used to hold out her hand in front of my desk and ask, ‘Did you bring enough gum to share with the whole class?’”

“Did you?” Benjie asks, wild-eyed.

“No,” I say. “That was the whole point. She wanted to embarrass me. And it always worked. Teachers just liked to say that.”

I take the gum from Benjie. “This is just between us, okay?”

He giggles and nods.

I pop the gum into my mouth. It’s even more insanely sweet and sugary and tastes even better than I remember. My taste buds explode. I chew, Benjie watching me with grand amusement, and then—

looking out my window to make sure the coast is clear—blow a big bubble. A massive bubble, in fact. It expands until it's the size of a small balloon. Benjie continues to watch me in silence as a child today might do today trying to figure out how to use a rotary phone. After a few moments, the flavor subsides.

“Want to learn a trick?” I ask.

“Yeah!”

“If you ever get caught chewing gum, don't stick it in a nice girl's hair or swallow it. Learn to do this.” I narrow my lips as if I'm going to whistle, puff my cheeks and spit my gum into the air as if Michael Jordan were draining a game-winning three-pointer as time expired. The purple gum arcs into the air and deposits directly into a trash can next to a low-slung sofa ten feet across my office.

Benjie pumps his fist and lifts his hand to high-five me.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asks.

“Sunday school,” I wink. “My grandma taught me.”

I stand, and he follows suit. I look him square in his big brown eyes.

“I'm telling you all of this because you're a good kid, Benjie. I just want you to know sometimes you have to stand up for yourself against boys who might not treat you so nicely. Don't take their anger—and your anger—out on other people. Kindness is like a wave on the Mississippi River. It ripples out.” I pause. “I didn't stand up enough for myself growing up. I wasn't proud of who I was.”

Benjie looks up at me. “Tyler says I read too much. He says only weirdos like books.”

“Listen to me. He's wrong. Only the best people like books. Be proud of yourself, Benjie. There's no one else in the world like you.”

He throws his arms open, and I hug him. In a world—and school system—where hugs are not often allowed anymore, I still hug. I know sometimes that can make a huge difference in the life of a child who may not get enough of them.

“Have a good summer, and be a good boy. Promise?”

“I promise, Mrs. Thatcher.”

He ambles out of my office, half skipping, despite knowing he's going to get in trouble.

Mrs. Thatcher.

I glance down at the nameplate sitting on my desk.

Ms. Thatcher.

Ms.

Not Mrs.

My heart hiccups.

“Ms. Thatcher to the playground immediately. Ms. Thatcher to the playground.”

I jump at the intercom booming in the hall.

Will this school year never end? How can the last day feel as interminable as a documentary on fruit flies?

I hurry out of my office and down the too-slick hall, skidding around the corners. I beeline through the cafeteria and out the double doors into the adorable little playground set squarely in the midst of a city neighborhood.

I look around.

Everything looks normal. Kids are screaming and playing, celebrating their last day before summer begins.

“What's going on?” I ask Mrs. Price, the beloved third-grade teacher who, I believe, is made of spun sugar and pumpkin spice and glitter.

She shrugs innocently, but as she does, kids from across the playground come running to form a circle around me. Teachers follow them.

“Happy birthday!” they yell.

“Thank you so much! I can’t believe you all remembered, especially on the last day of school.”

I notice Janice Mott, our principal and my boss, smiling at me. Or, at least, she’s trying to smile at me. Mrs. Mott has one of those upside-down mouths that makes it look as if she’s frowning even if she’s smiling. And she’s not a particularly sunny person by nature, either. Every cloudy day to Janice holds the potential of a lightning strike. Every jump rope is a tripping hazard. Every cafeteria French fry is a choking hazard. I guess when you go to a grocery store or out to a restaurant for thirty years and children run in the other direction, it takes a toll on your soul.

“Well, we certainly couldn’t let the big four-oh go unnoticed, could we, Becky?”

It comes out as *farh-oh* in Janice’s pronounced St. Louis accent. I was slightly immune to the accent having grown up in Hannibal, Missouri, before moving to St. Louis the summer I was seven, the age of many of my students right now. But it’s crept in over time, and I say *fahrty*, too.

Oh, by the way, you heard right. My name is Becky Thatcher from Hannibal, Missouri. And I can imagine what you’re thinking already. *Just how cruel or clueless were my parents?*

But you haven’t met my parents.

But I have never been the leading lady in a Mark Twain novel much less an unattainable aristocratic lady. My father worked at the brewery. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. Although I was an only child, when kids started to pick on me about my name I asked my parents why they didn’t have another daughter and name her Margaret just to ease my burden.

They never laughed at my humor, either. They always played by the rules. My life was defined by rules.

“Don’t upset the apple cart, Becky,” my dad would say.

“Slow and steady wins the race,” my mom would tell me.

“Becky,” Janice is saying. I blink and look at her, returning from my thoughts. “Happy Birthday.”

“Thank you so much,” I say. “This is such a…”

As the words leave my mouth, the children scream, “Surprise!” and reveal a birthday cake with a giant candle shaped like a *40* burning brightly on top of it sitting on a brightly colored kids’ picnic table. They begin to sing, their little voices serenading me with “Happy Birthday.” My kids have turned into sweet songbirds.

I applaud wildly when they finish.

“Blow out the candle!” a child yells when everyone is done.

I walk toward the cake.

“Make a wish! Make a wish!” the kids begin to chant.

I look at the cake and then into the candle. I know exactly what I want this year.

I shut my eyes and blow. When I open them, the children part, and I yelp.

My boyfriend Matt is standing before me, holding a velvet box in his outstretched hand.

My wish came true! It’s finally coming true!

“Matt? What are you doing here? What’s going on?”

“It’s a big day for you,” he says. “Fortieth birthday. Last day of school. It just seemed like the right time for…well, this.”

He hands me the box. I open it, the world now in slow motion.

Will it be his great-grandmother’s heirloom-inspired solitaire, the beautifully balanced ring his mother has talked about and pulled out of the safe endlessly for years?

Will it be the oval peach sapphire ring I adore, the one adorned with a diamond on either side of the center stone, set in a solid rose-gold band?

Or will it be the traditional diamond cut with no-frills design that Catholic Matt—St. Matthew as his friends call him—so loved?

My heart literally stops as I open the box.

I blink, hard, not understanding, and look into Matt's blue eyes.

"A key?"

Matt beams. "It's symbolic," he says, his voice rising in excitement, or as much as it can for such a buttoned-down guy. "It not only represents the key you have to my heart but also for the key you always dreamed of having."

I continue to stare, confused.

"The key to a vacation home in northern Michigan!" he finishes.

My head is reeling.

He didn't ask me to marry him—although we've been living together now for a decade, a virtual shamefest for not only our Catholic families but also the very Catholic city of St. Louis—but he bought us a vacation home?

I blurt out my thoughts. "You bought us a vacation home in Michigan? Matt, this is so unlike you. What's going on? I don't understand."

He shakes his head and laughs. "Let's sit, Becky," he says.

I follow his lead. I sit on a red bench, and Matt sits on a yellow bench, and it's then I realize there's a folder on the purple table before us, right next to the birthday cake.

I look around at the kids and teachers waiting patiently for me to cut the cake. Nothing brings a school together more than free pizza or birthday cake.

"I'm forty. You're forty. We need to start acting like it." Matt opens the folder. It's filled with documents littered with yellow stickers shaped like arrows that read *Sign Here*. "I didn't buy us a vacation home. That wouldn't be financially prudent at all. But we *can* start saving for one. Now. Together. And what better time to mark this new beginning than by starting a vacation-home fund."

He rotates the papers toward me.

"If we each invest five percent of our total annual income over the next twenty-five years, then we could be in a very good position to purchase a home by the time we're sixty-five." Matt looks at me and nods convincingly. "Without taking a loan!"

What?

"I already max out my retirement at work," I mutter. "And my salary isn't as big as yours. I just finished paying off student loans."

"But it must be equal," he says. "That's only fair."

I can only stare at him.

"Equal?" I ask. "But I already own the house in Brentwood."

"Own?" he says. "No, Becky, you have a mortgage."

"Exactly," I say. "*I* have a mortgage. *You* live with me. How is *that* equitable?"

Somehow, the math is lost on the financial planner. Instead, he begins to run numbers, calculate how much I would have to save and how much I would have to cut back every year on so-called luxuries like eating out, my yoga membership and travel. He calculates the soaring costs of vacation homes on the lakeshore in northern Michigan and what they might cost when I'm sixty-five. He calculates how much my salary might increase over the years, especially if Janice, who's about my age, never retires, and I remain here for life.

Life?

Life!

And then I begin to calculate how many years I have left in my life's bank. If the average life expectancy for a woman in the United States is seventy-nine, then my life is more than half over, starting tomorrow. I only have four hundred and sixty-eight months left to live.

Four hundred and sixty-eight!

There is a church down the street that towers over the playground. An ornate angel hovers near the top of the church, wings fluttering, eyes closed, and I've always wondered if it were soaring toward heaven or being sent back to earth.

Growing up Catholic, we had to learn our saints just as we had to learn the Stations of the Cross.

Matt has turned his attention back to the papers and is gleefully signing away. St. Matthew. His symbol is an angel. He is the patron saint of tax collectors and accountants.

I look at Matt, the angel, the steeple, the heavens, and I begin to laugh.

He glances up. "What's so funny?"

"I thought you were going to ask me to marry you just now," I say, my voice barely audible over the screams of happy children carried on the breeze. "I thought the velvet box was a ring. Maybe your great-grandma's, or the ones we've looked at every time we walk through the mall."

"Oh, Becky, we have such a good thing going," he says. "Why ruin it? Just let it ride."

He holds out his hand to take mine. I react as if his fingers are snakes and pull my hand away.

"Just let it ride? What am I, a slot machine?"

Teachers herd kids toward the playground, knowing the cake may be forever delayed and uncertain as to what I may say next.

"It's just that you always said your parents were too traditional," Matt says. "You said you wanted to do things differently."

"They were, and I do!" I say, my voice rising.

I look around. Teachers are staring. I lower my voice.

"But that doesn't mean I didn't want some of those traditional things, too. I wanted to get married. I wanted kids. I told you all that. But I wanted our marriage to be different. I wanted it to be filled with more risks and excitement. I wanted to raise our children to believe that anything was possible, every day was a miracle, that they could be anything they dreamed."

He just stares at me.

"Do you *ever* want to get married?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says, turning his eyes toward the papers before him.

"You don't *know*?" I ask. "We're Catholic. We're supposed to get married and have children. Lots of them. What are you so unsure of? We've known each other since college."

His blue eyes search the papers, then the cake, then my own.

"I don't know," he repeats. "I've played by the rules my whole life, too. And it's been fine. I just feel—I don't know—comfortable with you."

"It's been *fine*? You feel *comfortable* with me? What, am I, your favorite sweatshirt? That kind of comfortable?"

"Becky." His voice is steady, like he's talking to a client after a dismal day on the stock market. "I don't want to do this right now."

"But?" I prompt him. "A line like that always comes followed by a *but*."

"But I don't want to get married, either."

I blink. It's a hard blink, like slamming a car door.

"Do you ever want to get married?"

He shrugs.

"To me?"

Matt shakes his head. “I guess... I don’t think so.”

I feel a tear run down my face. I didn’t even feel it start.

Somewhere, deep inside, I’ve always known this. I’ve always, like my mom and dad, buried my head from what was really happening in the world around me. It was easier that way. Safer.

Before Matt moved in with me, he broke up with me—running a span from college into his late twenties—a half-dozen times to date other women.

Why did I take him back so readily so many times?

Because I believed I couldn’t do any better.

Because I was comfortable, too.

Because I was play-it-by-the-rules-don’t-upset-the-apple-cart-slow-and-steady-wins-the-race-Becky.

We talked about getting married hundreds of times. The same with having children. And it was just talk. I knew it was just talk, and I was okay with that all these years.

I stare at the 40-shaped candle.

Somewhere, deep inside, I knew it would never happen with Matt, and yet the years slipped away.

Matt lifts a finger toward the cake. I know him so well. He wants that icing.

Why did *he* come back so many times?

I think of what he just said. *It must be equal. That’s only fair.*

But it’s never been equal.

Matt moved into *my* apartment our senior year of college and then into my bungalow in Brentwood and has never paid a cent toward the mortgage. I worked two full-time jobs—as a teacher and then as a tutor in the summer—while earning my master’s degree in education, but Matt lived with me while going to MBA school full-time without a job. Vacations—which I planned—were always paid largely by me.

“Becky,” Matt finally says, “we make such a good team on paper.”

As a kid, as a student, as a human and as an administrator, my whole life has been *good on paper*.

I wrote every goal in a marbled notebook and color-coded timelines for my future accomplishments. Even my personal life.

I wanted to be a principal by thirty.

I wanted my first child at thirty-two, my second at thirty-four, so they were perfectly spaced in life and career.

Then I would be a superintendent at forty-five.

My mother pushed me to have children, and so I pushed Matt.

But now...

Matt finally sticks his finger into the icing and licks it clean. He nudges the papers toward me again. The patron saint of tax collectors is still running numbers in his head.

They just don’t add up for me any longer.

Matt sounds like such a schlump, but I realize he made me feel safe. He never raised his voice, he relished routine, he attended Mass, he loved my parents, he was all I believed I should have.

I may never have felt special or wanted, but at least I felt safe. And that’s all I believed I needed.

Until this very moment.

My life has been a mirage.

The world spins around me, just like the miniature merry-go-round kids are playing on right now.

I remember seeing a Maya Angelou interview with Oprah from the 1980s.

“When someone shows you who they are,” she said, “believe them.”

It’s not Matt’s fault this is happening. He’s always been the same person. He showed me.

It's my fault. It's always been my fault.

Did I even want to marry Matt? No.

Did I even want children with Matt? No.

And yet I stayed, knowing there was no great passion—for me or life. I stayed because I was as complacent and comfortable as Matt was. I never truly, madly, deeply loved him, and he was never crazy in love with me. We were simply marble notebooks filled with accomplishments, timelines and pretty color-coded writing and shiny stickers but zero emotion.

"I am such an idiot," I finally say. "I teach children every day not to be dumb. I teach them to reach for their dreams. I've never taken the time to remove the gum out of my own hair."

"Becky," Matt says, looking around to see if anyone is watching.

Never-make-a-spectacle-Becky.

"It's not you, Matt," I say. "I blame myself. I took the easy route just like my parents did. But it's never been the path I wanted. I want more, Matt. I want someone to love me, not on paper but so deeply in his heart that the heavens weep and our souls crack when we're not together. I want adventure. I want to be like my grandma. I don't want to look back after another forty years have passed and be filled with regret for being too scared to live."

"You will never feel this safe again, Becky."

As if on cue, the school bell rings.

"Good."

I stand and head back toward the school, the mouths of some teachers wide open, heads turning as I go.

As I pass little Ashley, she asks, "No wedding?"

I stop. Another surprise tear. "No, sweetheart. No wedding."

"Boo!" she says. "Big ol' poop head."

I smile, which turns into a laugh. The honesty of children.

When did I lose my own integrity?

"Yeah, you're right," I say to her. "Boo!"

I turn around and walk back to where Matt is still sitting.

I grab the papers from the table and throw them into the air.

He stands and looks at me, eyes wide.

"Becky," he starts.

"Boo!" I yell. "Boo to both of us!"

Some of the kids start booing, too.

"We both deserve that," I say to Matt. "We've never played to win. We've never even fought to the end and lost. We settled for a tie. And that deserves to be booed."

I start to turn away but stop. I grab my birthday cake and begin to walk away again. The cake is from Schneider's Bakery with the real butter-cream frosting.

"Hey!" Matt cries indignantly.

Of course he would be angrier at losing the cake than me.

"My birthday! My cake!" I yell. "My life!"

I stick my hand in it and take a big bite. "Sooo good!"

And it is. Sweet, decadent, delicious.

Just like life should be.

I look at the top of the cake, where my hand has swiped through the icing, erasing the word *Birthday*. The new message simply reads *Happy Becky!*

I walk toward the school.

I want my cake and to eat it, too.