

Louisa and her Little Women

By Claudia Haas

Email: claudiahaas12@gmail.com

<https://claudiahaas.com>

Copyright January 2, 2024

Louisa and her Little Women
By Claudia Haas

RUNNING TIME: 80-90 minutes

CAST: 14 (8 female, 6 male); extras possible for first and last scene

Louisa (female) 19-20; sees her writing as a way out of debt

Anna (female) 20-21; wants a traditional, comfortable life

Lizzie (female) 16-17; homebody; few wants

May (female) 11; artist*

*May was 10 at Hillside so you could go younger; I am playing with history just a bit

Alfie (male) 17-19; affable neighbor; fellow actor

John (male) 20; sort of courting Anna

Mr. Alcott (male) adult; father of the “little women;” intellectual, cannot hold a job

Mrs. Alcott (female) adult; mother of the “little women;” passionate social worker

Ellen Emerson (female) 13; Ralph Waldo Emerson’s fanciful daughter

Edith Emerson (female) 11; Emerson’s more serious daughter

Henry David Thoreau (male) 30-ish; young at heart and in spirit and seems young

Ralph Waldo Emerson (male) 40’s; distinguished author known locally as “Waldo”; kind

Nathaniel Hawthorne (male) adult; writer; shy

Sophia Hawthorne (female) adult; delicate healthy, wife of Nathaniel, painter

*TIME: June-July 1850’s: There are varying dates as to when the Alcotts left Concord. Some say 1855, others 1855. For their ages, I am thinking closer to 1855 but leaving it a bit vague.

SYNOPSIS: Louisa May Alcott said her years at Hillside were some of the happiest of her life. Indeed, Much of *Little Women* was based on her years there with her sisters. The play chronicles the last two weeks at Hillside before they were forced to give it up due to financial hardship and move to Boston. It would be a few years before they moved back to Concord and another decade before Alcott would write her famous novel. The play is based on anecdotes told by the sisters at that time.

MUSIC: The musical interludes are suggestions. You can eliminate them or put in different ones that are from the time period.

Intermission placement can be changed as the director sees fit. Stage directions are not written in stone. Change at will.

Curtain Scene: In the scene where May throws paint on the curtains (or paints them), it is in dim light so you can: 1. Not really paint the curtains. 2. Hang the 1-2 curtain panels up with the paint on them just prior to the scene. 3. Have extra sets of curtains and have May paint them and have the unpainted for the earlier part of the play. 4. Anything else you can think of.

*Remember: after the curtains have been painted, they are removed so you don’t see them again

Louisa and Her Little Women

ACT 1 – Concord – Early June 1855

(Lights up on the Alcott home and surrounding grounds. For the home, you need a sprawling living room complete with a dining table and chairs. Doors lead “elsewhere” – to the kitchen and bedrooms. A porch would be nice. The room is a shabby mix of old furniture. But you can design according to your stage and budget.

Outside, there is an audience in the midst of watching “The Witch’s Curse” written by Louisa and Anna Alcott. The audience can be on makeshift chairs or on blankets. It’s the last scene in the play. We see Louisa as Roderigo chained in a jail cell. You can make the production values as simple or complicated as you like. In Anna Alcott’s notes she tells us that all props, costumes and set pieces were made from “found” items. So have fun. Maybe the chain that affixes Roderigo is made up of string and tin cans! Their makeshift costumes should just be pieces suggesting nobility.

“The Witch’s Curse” is a comic melodrama penned by Louisa and Anna. As such, the acting can be over the top – but not bad acting. Acting- where they are going for a laugh – or a well-timed “hiss.” Have fun – especially with the archaic “thee’s and thou’s and didst’s and couldst’s. Think about Pyramus and Thisbe in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and how it’s described as a mirthful tragedy. As is common in melodramas, the audience may boo or hiss or shout approval during the scene.)

SCENE 1

(They are at the last scene of “The Witch’s Curse.” “RODOLPHO/LOUISA” – a very bad man – is chained to a cell in a dungeon. He is asleep. “NORNA/ANNA THE WITCH” enters.)

NORNA/ANNA

Rodolpho! Thy fate is sealed, thy course is run.
And Norna’s work is well-nigh done.

(With a flourish, Norna disappears. LIZZIE may do a sound effect backstage. HUGO/ALFIE enters. Rodolpho awakens.)

RODOLPHO/LOUISA

Mine eyes are bewildered by the forms I have looked upon in sleep. Methought Old Norna stood beside me, whispering evil spells, calling fearful phantoms to bear me hence.

HUGO/ALFIE

Thy evil conscience gives thee little rest, my lord.

RODOLPHO

Who is there? Stand back! Ah! ‘tis no dream – I am fettered. Where is my sword?

HUGO

(HUGO teases RODOLPHO with the Death Warrant.)

In my safe-keeping, Count Rodolpho, lest in thy rage thou may'st be tempted to add another murder to thy list of sins. *(Rodolpho sinks down.)* Dids't thou think thou could'st escape? Ahhhhh – no! I, Hugo hath watched and followed thee. I swore to win vengeance. The king hath offered a high reward for thy poor head and it is mine. Methinks it may cheer your solitude my lord, so I came hither on my way to bear thy death warrant to the captain of the guard. What wilt thou give for this? Hark ye! Were this destroyed, thou might'st escape ere another were prepared. How dost thou like the plot?

RODOLPHO

And wilt thou save me, Hugo? Give me not up to the king! I'll be thy slave. All I possess is thine. I'll give thee countless gold. Ah! Pity and save me, Hugo!

HUGO

Ha, ha! I did but jest. Think'st thou I could forego the joy of seeing thy proud head laid low? Where was thy countless gold when I did ask of thee? No, no! Thou canst not tempt me to forget my vengeance. 'Tis Hugo's turn to play the Master now. Mayst thou rest well and so, good even' my lord.

(HUGO makes a theatrical exit.)

RODOLPHO

Thus ends my hope for freedom. My life is drawing to a close, and all my sins seem rising up before me. The forms of my murdered victims flit before me, and their dying words ring in my ears – Leonore praying for mercy at my feet; old Norna whispering curses on my soul. How am I haunted and betrayed! Oh fool, fool that I have been! My pride, my passion, all end in this. Hated, friendless, and alone, the proud Count Rodolpho dies a felon's death. 'tis just, 'tis just!

(Enter LOUIS/ANNA masked.)

What's that? Who spoke? Ah. 'tis mine unknown foe. What wouldn't thou here?

LOUIS/ANNA

Thou didst bribe one Hugo to murder the young Count Louis, whom thou didst hate. He did thy bidding, and thy victim fell; but Norna saved, and healed his wounds. She told him of his murdered sister's fate, and he hath joined her in her work of vengeance; and foiled thee in thy sinful plots. I saved Lenore, and guarded her till I had won her heart. Dost doubt the tale? Look on thine unknown foe, and find it true. *(Unmasks. RODOLPHO reacts forcefully.)*

RODOLPHO

Louis - whom I hated and would kill – thou here? Thou husband of Lenore? Happy and beloved! It is too much! Too much! If thou lovest life, depart. I'm going mad. I see wild phantoms whirling around me. Voices whispering fearful words. Touch me not – there is blood on my hands. Will this dream last forever?

LOUIS

May heaven pity thee! Theresa! Thou art avenged!

(Louis exits.)

RODOLPHO

Ah these are fearful memories for a dying hour!

(He may throw himself on the floor. NORNA/ANNA enters. She had a very quick change and it shows.)

NORNA

Sinful man, didst thou think thy death-bed could be peaceful? As they have haunted thee in life, so shall spirits darken thy last hour. *I* bore thy murdered wife to a quiet grave, and raised a spirit to affright and haunt thee to death. *I* warned Hugo, and betrayed thee to his power; and *I* brought down this awful doom upon thee. As thou didst refuse all mercy to thy victims, so shall mercy be denied to thee. Thou shalt die unblessed, unpitied, unforgiven. Thy victims are avenged, and Norna's work is done.

(And with a flourish and a fun sound effect from LIZZIE, NORNA disappears.)

RODOLPHO

Ha, ha! 'tis gone! Yet stay!

(RODOLPHO spies something in the distance.)

'tis Louis' ghost! How darkly his eyes shine upon me! See, see! The demons gather round me! How fast they come. Old Norna is there... muttering her spells. Let me go free! Unbind these chains! Hugo! Louis! Lenore! Theresa!

(RODOLPHO is gasping his last breaths.)

Thou... art... avenged!

(Maybe a dying scene? In any event – Rodolpho is dead. Norna glides in and looks at the dead body and is pleased. END OF PLAY.)

AUDIENCE wildly applauds, whistles, stomps feet. The cast take their bows – a musical interlude of self-serving bows for everyone could be fun here. LOUISA comes forward.)

LOUISA

Thank-you all for coming. Please come back when we will be presenting Charles Dickens "The Haunted House" as an autumn treat for all of you.)

(More clapping and soon the cast mingles with the audience. JOHN approaches ANNA immediately. ANNA is with MAY.)

JOHN

Anna! You were ... magnificent. Glorious. Such feeling. You disappeared into your characters.

ANNA

That's so sweet of you to say that.. I did have some quick changes because May refused to be the witch.

MAY

I didn't want to be ugly!

ANNA

I didn't look too hideous, did I?

JOHN

You could never look ugly to me.

(Meanwhile, ALFIE, LIZZIE and LOUISA are together.)

ALFIE

This was the greatest time ever. Thank-you for trusting me with the role of Hugo.

(Maybe a beat. Maybe fishing.)

I hope I did it justice.

LIZZIE

You were remarkable.

ALFIE

Thank-you. Louisa, did you also think I was ... remarkable?

LOUISA

You were absolutely stupendous, dear Alfie. Nobody will ever play it better than you.

(THOREAU approaches LOUISA.)

THOREAU

Congratulations on another well-done theatrical treat. Alfie, you were a charming aristocrat and dear Lizzie, the sound effects brought us into the world of the play. Sweet May, your setting was evocative and creative. Bravo and Brava!

ALFIE

That's awfully kind of you to say so. Thank-you, Mr. Thoreau.

THOREAU

Louisa always creates astounding worlds with her words.

LOUISA

I'd love to talk to you about it.

THOREAU

By all means. I have some engagements in town tomorrow. The day after?

LOUISA

I look forward to it.

MR. ALCOTT and MRS. ALCOTT are off to the side.)

EDITH

Louisa! You were so mean.

LOUISA

I know! It's great fun.

ELLEN

Did you finish the fairy story? We are excited for the ending.

LOUISA

I have been so busy getting ready for our little production, I haven't had time.

ELLEN

But you'll finish it soon! Promise?

LOUISA

Promise.

(EMERSON approaches.)

EMERSON

Well done, everyone. I must say your house and grounds are well-suited for your theatrics.

ANNA

Thank-you. We do love it here.

MAY

We have a new spectacular one we're working on. We're going to do it at night when it's really spooky.

EMERSON

But whatever will you do for lighting? Do you expect everyone to hold a candle?

LOUISA

We'll figure it out.

EMERSON

I trust you will.

(We switch briefly to NATHANIEL and SOPHIA HAWTHORNE.)

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

All this theatrical excitement has exhausted me. Would you mind if I sneaked away?

HAWTHORNE

Of course not. I can walk you back.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

There's no need. It's a short walk. Please offer my congratulations to the thespians. The play was charming – if bloody.

HAWTHORNE

I'll be home shortly.

(SOPHIA exits. HAWTHORNE approaches LOUISA but is stopped by MR. ALCOTT.)

MR. ALCOTT

It's kind of you to come, Nathaniel.

HAWTHORNE

Of course. I thought I'd just have a word with them. Both Sophia and I enjoyed their theatrical endeavor.

MR. ALCOTT

Remember – as of yet, they know nothing.

HAWTHORNE

They'll have to be told soon. I wouldn't wait much longer. The papers are ready to be signed.

(HAWTHORNE goes to LOUISA.)

MRS. ALCOTT

He's right. We need to tell them.

MR. ALCOTT

Now is not a good time.

(MAY approaches them.)

MRS. ALCOTT

Well done, my darling “bud of Mary.”

MR. ALCOTT

Indeed, you outdid yourself with the scene in the woods and that dungeon – I am impressed with what you did with so little to work with.

MAY

Wait until you see what we have planned for the autumn. Louisa says it’s guaranteed to make your skin crawl.

MR. ALCOTT

I can hardly wait.

(MR. AND MRS. ALCOTT exchange a look as the lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

(It is the following day after the play – late afternoon. Lights up inside the Alcott home – their “Hillside” home in Concord, MA. All is well-worn with piles of books and scribbles everywhere. Maybe we spy MAY’S paintings. The dining room table has LOUISA’S atlas that she used as a desk along with pages and pages of writings. There are quills about, paints, music books, fabrics being sewn.)

LIZZIE enters and cleans off the dining room table as best she can – putting things “somewhere.” Satisfied, that she can now set the table she exits back into the kitchen where she is making dinner.

LOUISA and MAY enter together. MAY has her school books and LOUISA has the mail and maybe a basket of sewing to finish. MAY dumps her school books on the dining room table as LOUISA sifts through the mail, squirrels away one letter – up her sleeve? in a pocket? and leaves the rest on the table.)

MAY

I am never going back! If Mary and Clara were on fire and I had a glass of water – I’d drink it. If Priscilla was struck in a ditch, I’d cover her with bugs!

LOUISA

So it was another delightful day at school?

MAY

And I don’t need you making fun of me. And is that soup I am smelling for dinner? Again? It’s too hot for soup!

(ANNA enters with books which she dumps on the dining room table.)

ANNA

And how is everyone this fine evening?

MAY

I want to lock all my classmates in outhouses.

LOUISA

A fate worse than death!

(LIZZIE enters with dishes.)

LIZZIE

Get everything off the table! *(Beat.)* Please. I just cleared it.

MAY

Are you making soup again?

LIZZIE

What else can I make with the few ingredients we have?

LOUISA

At least salt it. You never put in enough salt.

LIZZIE

And you use way too much.

LOUISA

I like food salty. It suits me.

ANNA

They say you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

LOUISA

I'll keep that in mind if I ever become a frog.

LIZZE

Ahem. Table. Please.

(They clear the table – putting things “somewhere.” LOUISA steps aside and tries to read her letter.)

ANNA

Good news?

LOUISA

Don't know yet. I'm afraid to open it.

(LOUISA exits into kitchen.)

MAY

Three more days of misery and then school ends.

ANNA

Louisa and I always wanted to go to a proper school. Consider yourself lucky.

MAY

I'd rather stay home with Lizzie. She wouldn't torture me.

LIZZIE

My good nature may expire soon if we don't get this table set.

LOUISA (*Entering*)

I added an onion. Old Man Clemons gave me one as a tip for hemming his pants.

LIZZIE

You know what Father says...

LOUISA

They grow underground which means they are a vegetable from the devil. I was feeling devilish.

ANNA

They do add flavor.

MAY

Which your soup needs.

LIZZE

You stay home and try and feed a family of six with what we have in the kitchen.

LOUISA

Is this "Lizzie" speaking? Sweet Lizzie who Father calls the "Sea of Tranquility."

LIZZIE

I'm sorry. It is hot and Heathcliff ran away and I guess I am out of sorts.

LOUISA

Heathcliff can't have gone far. He likes his dinner. Have you searched the attic?

LIZZIE

I've searched everywhere.

LOUISA

We'll look after we eat.

LIZZIE

Thank-you.

LOUISA

Why is the table set for four?

LIZZIE

Mother and Father are dining with the Hawthornes.

MAY

Quick! Sneak some meat on the table while he's gone.

LOUISA

Ha! Try and find some meat in the Alcott household. I wonder what Mother and Father are doing dining at the Hawthornes. We've been at Hillside for almost five years. Mother and Father have never dined with the them.

ANNA

Mr. Hawthorne's shy. And Mrs. Hawthorne is in delicate health. They don't get out much.

LIZZIE

Maybe they finally got around to being neighborly.

LOUISA

It's odd. Something's afoot.

LIZZIE

Look. I even baked bread! Do you want me to bring the soup out or shall we serve ourselves.

MAY

Let's make clean-up easy and serve ourselves.

(LIZZIE and MAY exit into the kitchen. LOUISA opens her mail.)

ANNA

And?

LOUISA

No.

ANNA

I'm sorry. What did you send them?

LOUISA

The latest. "The Witch's Curse."

ANNA

The audience loved it. It's filled with passion!

LOUISA

I know. But according to the publisher:

(LOUISA takes out the letter.)

"Our readers are of the female persuasion. As such, I think many murders are not suited to the delicate constitutions of our reader. If you have writings that are more tame and that quiet the emotions, we will be happy to read it." Sincerely, blah-blah-blah.

ANNA

That's encouraging!

LOUISA

That my writing is too excitable for women?

ANNA

That they're willing to read more of your writing. That one gentleman in Boston wasn't so kind.

LOUISA

Yes. The one that ended with, "please don't send anything else" was not the most encouraging rejection.

ANNA

But still – you keep writing.

LOUISA

I have no choice. Ideas burst out of my hands. A small part of me believes that somewhere I will find an editor who is a good fit for my work. Who knows? Maybe he isn't around yet. But will be in the future.

ANNA

It's always a "he," isn't it?

LOUISA

Always.

(MAY and LIZZIE enter with their soup and bread.)

LIZZIE

Don't let it get cold.

(ANNA and LOUISA exit to the kitchen.)

How is it?

MAY

Not bad. A bit salty.

LIZZIE

That sneaky Louisa. She added salt when I wasn't looking.

MAY

She always thinks she knows better than us.

LOUISA (*Peeking out.*)

And I do!

(*MAY throws some rolls or bread at her.*)

LIZZIE

I just baked that!

(*There is the sound of a crash and a loud meow.*)

LOUISA

We found Heathcliff!

ANNA (*Entering.*)

Another charming dinner at the Alcotts.

(*And everyone settles down to their dinner, passing rolls and butter and possibly all speaking about their day all at one as the lights go down.*)

END OF SCENE

SCENE 3

(LIGHTS UP on the outskirts of the ALCOTT'S land. ALFIE is with LOUISA. LOUISA has a notebook. It is the following morning.)

ALFIE

It is a nice morning.

LOUISA

Yes. Charming.

(Beat.)

ALFIE

I was wondering... I know you're busy ... you seem to always be busy these days... but I thought ... if it would suit you, of course...if you wouldn't mind...

LOUISA

Is there an actual question coming?

ALFIE

Would you like to take a walk through my farm? Lots of things have sprouted and the garden is filled with butterflies and well... I thought you might enjoy it.

LOUISA

That would be very special but/

(Thoreau approaches. He also has a notebook.)

THOREAU

Louisa! Sorry, I'm late. I was looking for notes for tutoring the girls later and I'm afraid my room is a clutter of paper.

LOUISA

It's not a problem. Alfie has been keeping me company. Alfie, I would love to have a walkabout on your farm.

ALFIE

But you are otherwise engaged.

LOUISA

Mr. Thoreau has kindly offered to advise me on my writing. With all my rejection slips, I could hardly turn him down. We'll do our walk another time?

ALFIE

Absolutely. Well... Good day to you both.

(ALFIE exits.)

THOREAU

Nice lad.

LOUISA

We've been friends ever since we moved to Hillside. He's got such a sweet disposition – always eager to please.

THOREAU

Indeed.

LOUISA

So, what do you think? Wait! Don't tell me yet. I need to get my head on straight.

(LOUISA paces.)

In a minute. *(Beat.)* All right. I think I'm ready.

THOREAU

It shows promise.

LOUISA

Promise?

THOREAU

Your edits are quite good.

LOUISA

Thank goodness. I redid the opening as you suggested.

(Reading "with feeling.")

“To and fro, like a wild creature in its cage, paced that handsome woman, with bent head, locked hands, and restless steps. Some mental storm, swift and sudden as a tempest of tropics had swept over her and left its marks behind. As if in anger of the beauty, now proved powerless, all ornaments had been flung away, yet still it shone undimmed and filled her with passionate regret. Despair had murdered hope.”

Right from the beginning, I have flung the reader midway into the story without any exposition. She's pacing. She's agitated. She flung away her jewels so she is probably rich. She is handsome – probably beautiful. Don't you think the readers now wants to know more?

THOREAU

The opening is accomplished. I have no quibble with any of your writing. You entice the reader. But then you bring them down a slippery slope of blood and thunder in your stories. Not everyone wants to relax with blood and guts.

LOUISA

And why not? We are all bound to our bodies which is a mixture of blood and guts.

THOREAU

Which some people would like to forget about.

LOUISA

There's an endless stream of poems and stories about rainbows and achieving your heart's desire and it's all been done to death.

THOREAU

You will get no argument from me. But do know that the editors have to sell their magazines and if the stories prove to be too lurid and sales go down, that doesn't help anyone.

LOUISA

Am I supposed to write what I think people want to hear? Where's the honesty in that? Where's the joy of discovering your voice instead of hiding it?

THOREAU

I am probably the last person you should ask – for what do I have but a failed book.

LOUISA

It's a beautiful book – the details of your trip are exquisite. I felt like I was on the trip with you.

THOREAU

And I am grateful to have two fans. You and my brother.

LOUISA

And Mr. Emerson.

THOREAU

Ah yes. The many who ruined me. I never should have published it on my own. I should have waited – for the world to pay me. Waldo encouraged me and I was flattered. And look where I am now. Broke and taking any job I can to feed myself.

LOUISA

Are you two still not talking? You were such good friends.

THOREAU

We are cordial.

LOUISA

There's some irony there. You are mad at Mr. Emerson because he thought highly of your book.

THOREAU

I am ... piqued with Waldo because he did not consider my financial circumstances before encouraging me to spend every dime I had to self-publish. Don't make the same mistake. Remember your worth.

LOUISA

I can't afford to self-publish. I need every penny I can squeeze from a publisher. Of course, I am not being offered any pennies. I am not being offered anything.

THOREAU

Did you ever think about writing about your world?

LOUISA

I don't think the life of a laundress and seamstress would delight many readers. They probably have enough dreariness at home and want to escape. I read to escape.

THOREAU

Take a page from Waldo's book. Just walk through the woods as he does and then go home and write your impressions on it. You don't have to worry about character or plot right now. Just exercise your eye and see if it can speak to your writing hand.

LOUISA

Mr. Emerson has a much more carefree life than I have. When I walk through the woods, my mind turns to all the jobs that need to be accomplished so we can eat. I barely see anything.

THOREAU

So the assignment would be good for you. It's freeing to just notice your surroundings instead of living in your head. Look around. Right this very minute. What do you see?

LOUISA

All those cobwebs. They are beginning to dwarf the flowers. I should sweep them away.

THOREAU

But you can't. Because for all you know, they are handkerchiefs for the fairies. What if the fairies spread them around your flowers to protect them?

LOUISA

That idea is a bit whimsical for a naturalist.

THOREAU

To appreciate nature, you need a good eye and maybe a background in biology. But a touch of whimsy doesn't hurt. Try spending five minutes here watching and listening and then write about it. Then you can go about your day.

LOUISA

I don't have the time.

THOREAU

Trust me. You have five minutes. I'll wager that after five minutes of taking in what is good in the world, you will be more productive than ever. Deal?

LOUISA

Deal.

THOREAU

The Emerson girls are waiting for me. Today we will plant seedlings and speak of the goodness of the earth. I suppose I should be grateful to Waldo for giving me a job tutoring his daughters. Then I am off to my afternoon as a surveyor. You are not the only one with many jobs to try and put food on the table. Now, just stay here and soak in what the world gives to you. I'll see you in a few days. I look forward to it. I will miss these times.

LOUISA

Are you leaving so soon?

THOREAU

No. But I thought. I mean, I was told that your family... forgive me, I misspoke. I often do these days.

(THOREAU exits. LOUISA stands confused and impatient – maybe shaking her leg or her hands waiting for the five minutes to pass. And soon, she settles down, breathes in the aroma of the woods and looks at the sky as the lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

(The next afternoon. LIZZIE is in the living room bandaging MAY'S hand. LOUISA enters.)

LOUISA

I need a break! May? What are you doing home early?

MAY

Before you criticize, Mother says I was right to come home.

LOUISA

Because....

MAY

Teacher rapped me on my hand until my knuckles bled.

LIZZIE

Mother says she doesn't have to return to school.

LOUISA

There are only two days left.

MAY

I never have to return to that horrid place ever!

LOUISA

Why don't you start from the beginning?

MAY

I punched Charley.

LOUISA

Is that the beginning?

MAY

He said my flower drawings were terrible.

LOUISA

How did he see your flower drawings?

MAY

I was finishing one up during arithmetic.

LOUISA

Because arithmetic is a good time to start drawing.

MAY

I already know that lesson by heart. I didn't want to waste my time listening to the same stuff over and over.

LOUISA

That's reasonable.

MAY

I know! And then Charley peered over at me and took my pencils and said they were the ugliest flowers he'd ever seen.

LOUISA

So you punched him!

MAY

I sure did.

LOUISA

That, too, is reasonable.

MAY

Teacher didn't think so. She came over and rapped my hands hard. Twice for punching Charley and twice for not doing the arithmetic. When I showed her my arithmetic work for the day – which was perfect – she rapped me again.

LOUISA

Why did she do that?

MAY

I didn't stay to find out. I grabbed my drawings, shoved Charley, got my pencils back and ran home.

LOUISA

And I am glad you did. Horrid teacher! I guess you'll have to get your education the same way we all did – from Father. He's not a great breadwinner but he is a good teacher.

LIZZIE

You shouldn't talk like that.

LOUISA

Just the truth. Don't we all work to support this family?

MAY

If I'm not in school, I could also work.

LOUISA

Those days will come soon enough. Be grateful you have time for your drawing.

MAY

I can't draw with my hands all swollen.

LOUISA

You've captured our garden perfectly. I do declare you are a genius with color. They're giving me some ideas.

(ANNA enters.)

ANNA

What's this? A sister gathering? Why wasn't I invited?

LOUISA

You're home early. I was just taking a small break.

ANNA

The twins are sick so they let me go for the day. What's everyone else's excuse?

MAY

I ran away from school.

LIZZIE

I was just cleaning her wounds.

ANNA

I may faint from all this excitement. But I am sure there is some soup to sustain me.

LIZZIE

You will be happy to know that there is no soup and Mother is concocting something in the kitchen.

OTHERS (ad lib)

Oh, thank goodness, etc.

LIZZIE

If that's the thanks I get for keeping you warm and fed most of the winter...

ANNA

Dear Lizzie. We love you but it is June and we are warm enough.

LIZZIE

I feel underappreciated. I am going to help Mother.

(LIZZIE exits.)

LOUISA

My work break's over. My fingers are itching to hem yet another one of Clement's trousers. I swear he must be shrinking. It such an exciting life, isn't it?

(To ANNA.)

Take this and read it later. When you are not near me and I can't see you reading it.

ANNA

A new story?

LOUISA

Just ... some scribblings. But I don't know. It's different. See you all later for dinner.

MAY

Were you going to tell me something about my drawings?

LOUISA

Later. Let me give it a think. The hems of Clems await!

(LOUISA exits.)

MAY

She always does that. She says something mysterious and then leaves.

ANNA

Louisa knows how to make an exit. And what are you doing home?

MAY

I was teased at school and I need some cheering up. Tell me what you think.

ANNA

You always had a good sense of color.

MAY

Thanks.

ANNA

The tulips look like they have too many lips though.

MAY

Artistic license.

ANNA

But then nobody knows what they are.

MAY

You did!

ANNA

You asked for my opinion!

MAY

And the correct answer would be, "These are perfect, May. You will be a fine artist one day."

ANNA

"These are perfect, May. You will be a fine artist one day."

MAY

You're just saying that.

ANNA

Just remember what a good sister I have been to you when you're rich and famous for your paintings.

MAY

Do you really think that could happen?

ANNA

I am counting on it. I foresee you being in great demand as a portrait painter and Louisa writing novels that will shake the world. As for me, I will get married and settle down in Concord and send the two of you my dressmaker bills.

(There's a knock at the door. ANNA answers it.)

ANNA

Good afternoon, Mr. Hawthorne... Mrs. Hawthorne. What a lovely surprise.

HAWTHORNE

Is it? I thought your mother was expecting me. I ... wasn't expecting all of you.

ANNA

I was let off early as the twins were throwing up. Not a pretty sight.

HAWTHORNE

I see.

MAY

And I ran away from school.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

Oh. I'm sorry.

MAY

Don't be. Mother approves.

(MRS. ALCOTT enters with LIZZIE.)

MRS. ALCOTT

Nathaniel! Sophia! Right on time! Please. Come sit down. Lizzie, tell your father that the Hawthornes have arrived. May I get you something? Tea? A biscuit?

HAWTHORNE

Oh. No, thank-you. We just had lunch.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

We've never actually been inside.

MRS. ALCOTT

Where are my manners? Please, come inside.

(MR. ALCOTT and LIZZIE enter. LOUISA follows them in.)

Oh good. Everyone's here. Girls, you know the Hawthornes.

(A few greetings.)

LOUISA

It's kind of you to pay us a visit. I believe it is the first time.

HAWTHORNE

Yes. I ... am not one ... to intrude.

MR. ALCOTT

Girls, we have business to discuss with Mr. Hawthorne. You may leave.

MRS. ALCOTT

I think they should stay.

MR. ALCOTT

But/

MRS. ALCOTT

/It's time they knew.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

Do you mean they don't know? Oh dear. This could be awkward.

(The sisters line up carefully so that they can hear everything that is going on.)

MR. ALCOTT

Can I offer you a brandy?

HAWTHORNE

Oh! No, thank-you. Mrs. Alcott already offered me tea.

MR. ALCOTT

Of course. Well, what do you think?

HAWTHORNE

It's all lovely of course.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

A bit worn...

MR. ALCOTT

Yes, four children and a house filled with kittens all the time will do that.

LOUISA

And we scrubbed the rugs after the bobcat had kittens here. Right, May?

MAY

I scrubbed until my hands bled. That Silly Lizzie thinking the bobcat was a house cat.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

Bobcat?

ANNA

Well, she was rather small.

LOUISA

But her kittens were huge. Happily, we relocated them in the country.

MRS. ALCOTT

And it never happened again.

MR. ALCOTT

Lizzie, is this true?

LIZZIE

It was an honest mistake.

MR. ALCOTT

How did I not know about this?

MRS. ALCOTT

Because it happened years ago. We didn't want to worry your mind with a problem that was solved.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

You do have lively tales.

(Beat.)

The curtains are lovely. And in good shape.

MRS. ALCOTT

The girls make sure they are freshly laundered.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

They do brighten up the room.

HAWTHORNE

And they come with the house?

MR. ALCOTT

Of course.

HAWTHORNE

Thank-you. I love the space for our children.

MRS. ALCOTT

Yes, our children have certainly enjoyed their time here. Isn't that true?

(There are some murmurs of "Yes, we have." By now, ANNA and LOUISA understand what is going on even if the two younger ones do not.)

HAWTHORNE

I don't want to cause trouble but I think Sophia would prefer to bring in her own furniture .. am I right?

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

Ours is a bit - quieter.

MRS. ALCOTT

It's not a problem.

LOUISA

And we've done everything we could do to remove the smoky smell from the kitchen after our boarder, Mr. Edwards, set it on fire. She shouldn't get any headaches from that.

ANNA

Indeed, it was months ago. I am sure there is no trace of the smoke.

MR. ALCOTT

What?

LOUISA

But the stove is fussy and never seems to get hot enough anymore. Maybe it's the crack. But hot food is overrated, isn't it? It's too mindful of the fires of hell.

MR. ALCOTT

Girls! Enough. The stove is not cracked.

MRS. ALCOTT

Actually Amos, it is. But it works perfectly.

HAWTHORNE

I see. I suppose I could move my stove. Sophia is used to its peculiarities.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

Every stove has them.

LOUISA

Did you want to see the upstairs? Be mindful of the stairs. We are always worried that one will give way and we will fall. I can show you how to navigate them safely.

MRS. ALCOTT

Stop scaring them. The stairs are fine. You are welcome to go up and down them as many times as you wish.

LOUISA

Just don't run barefoot. A splinter in your foot is no fun.

MRS. ALCOTT

Louisa!

ANNA

I think you went too far.

LOUISA

Darn! I was just about to talk about the bears.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

Bears?

MR. ALCOTT

Sophia, I can assure you that a bear has never seen the inside of this house.

HAWTHORNE

Very well. I assume the terms are the same.

MR. ALCOTT

Nothing's changed there. We shall have the papers drawn up in town. They should be ready in a few days.

HAWTHORNE

Thank-you. *(Beat.)* We should be getting back. The children are at a rambunctious age and dear Mrs. Console tends to get overwhelmed.

MRS. ALCOTT

Thank-you for coming by.

HAWTHORNE and SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

It's a pleasure.

(A little flurry of good-byes as HAWTHORNE exits and then all is silent with The sisters staring at their parents. Finally, LOUISA speaks.)

LOUISA

We are moving.

MRS. ALCOTT

Yes.

LOUISA

And you were going to tell us – when? When we saw the furniture being moved from the house.

MRS. ALCOTT

I believe we just told you now.

MAY

I don't want to move! I love it here.

MRS. ALCOTT

We have found ... new opportunity in Boston. It's a thriving city and it will be good for all of you to get out of the confines of Concord and experience more of the world.

LOUISA

We are in debt, aren't we?

MR. ALCOTT

That's none of your concern. The opportunities for you in Boston are tremendous. The city is filled with history, culture, and learned people/

LOUISA

/people that you will spend time philosophizing with while the rest of us work our fingers to the bone to support your non-working lifestyle.

ANNA

Louisa! Don't.

(There is a momentary hush. LIZZIE may run to her mother. The unspoken has been spoken and cannot be taken back.)

LOUISA

Why not? Mark my words, we are going to be expected to work off more of Father's debts.

MAY

Since I am not going back to school, I can work to help out. I am more than happy to sacrifice my schooling for the betterment of this family.

LOUISA

You will go to school in Boston. None of us could go. One of us needs to be properly taught.

MR. ALCOTT

I made sure you had a fine education – even though our society does not think women have need of that. I have looked out for your mind as well as your body and soul.

LOUISA

You have dragged us through countless experiments. You left us to harvest the farm at Fruitlands while you lay all comfy in your bed with one of your convenient headaches. No wonder we are always in debt.

ANNA

Louisa – stop.

LOUISA

You remember, Anna? How old were we? Eleven? Twelve? Out in the bitter cold digging up failed crops.

MR. ALCOTT

The farm would have succeeded if we had had enough committed people. People are afraid of new ideas/

LOUISA

/people are afraid of starving to death/

MR. ALCOTT

/my dear daughter who believes she knows everything at the tender age of nineteen – you would do well to open the drawers of your mind to listen instead of opening them to make sweeping pronouncements. Your mind is a library. Use all the information you have stored for honesty discussion, for compassion. Close the drawers that are mere scribblings with nothing to offer be discontent. You will find life much sweeter.

(A moment.)

MAY

Can we go back to my schooling? Because it is not as much fun as you think to be the poorest student in class.

LOUISA

Would you rather clean the dirty laundry of others? I'd rather be a poor student than spend hot summer days over a hotter washtub scrubbing until my fingernails fall off. Which is what Mother and I do.

MAY

I would rather draw.

LOUISA

And I would rather write.

ANNA

What about you, Lizzie? You are so quiet.

LIZZIE

I am content to be wherever my family is.

MRS. ALCOTT

Of course we will spend as much time together as possible.

LOUISA

What does that mean?

MR. ALCOTT

Boston apartments are small. I'm afraid we cannot afford a place that will house the six of us. But we have arranged accommodations for Anna and Louisa. For free rent and meals, Anna will teach cousin Abigail's children. Louisa will be working for cousin Seymour and his family.

Teaching?
LOUISA

Household chores.
MR. ALCOTT

So a maid.
LOUISA

The official title is "Second Maid."
MR. ALCOTT

Why do I see cleaning outhouses in my future?
LOUISA

MRS. ALCOTT
Lizzie will stay home and help with my chores so I can work with the immigrant population. They are sorely lacking goods and services. We are fortunate to have homes. Others are not as fortunate.

And what will Father do?
LOUISA

MR. ALCOTT
This and that. I will be available to help where I can. Meanwhile, I do have some business to attend to. There are a lot of loose ends to tie up. I may be back late.

(MR. ALCOTT exits.)

MRS. ALCOTT
Everything will be fine. We've done this before.

LOUISA
And we'll probably do it again.

MOTHER
No doubt. I'll see to dinner.

(MRS. ALCOTT exits.)

ANNA
I wonder if John will visit Boston.

LIZZIE
Do you think we can take the piano?

MAY

I don't want to leave! All my memories are here.

LOUISA

Didn't you say that you were more than happy to leave?

MAY

School! I am happy to leave school. But I want all of my Christmasses here – in this big old rickety house with the barn.

LIZZIE

And the kittens.

ANNA

And the garden.

LIZZIE

And the cherry tree in bloom.

LOUISA

Listen to me, sisters. When we are properly on our own, we are never going to get into debt. We will pay our own way or do without. That will give us freedom to live as we like.

ANNA

Imagine having the money to buy the prettiest frock in town.

MAY

Or paints in every shade.

LOUISA

And a proper library. Not just books borrowed from neighbors.

LIZZIE

And shelves filled with sheet music.

ANNA

We're dreaming.

LOUISA

I never dream. I plan.

ANNA

It looks like our parents have already made our plans.

MAY

If the plan involves a classroom, I will claw my way out.

LOUISA

That's the spirit!

ANNA

Sometimes ... it's better to accept what is. And do whatever comes next with grace.

LIZZIE

Right now, the only thing that comes next is dinner. And I, for one, am going to help.

(As the SISTERS exit into the kitchen, ANNA stops LOUISA.)

ANNA

Your poem...

LOUISA

I know it's not what I usually write/

ANNA

/It's wonderful.

LOUISA

Do you truly think so? From deep inside the far reaches of your heart?

ANNA

I felt like I was there – watching the sun. Isn't that words are supposed to do? Bring you to another place.

LOUISA

But what will a publisher think?

ANNA

Stop! It doesn't matter. Don't wrap your self-worth into what some anonymous stranger thinks.

LOUISA

I don't know what to say. At the moment, words fail me.

ANNA

Words will never fail you.

(LOUISA hugs ANNA and they exit into the kitchen. The lights fade to black.)

SCENE 5

(It is evening. LIZZIE is curled up next to or by LOUISA. LIZZIE could be doing embroidery and ANNA is there with a book. ANNA and MAY are similarly next to each other. MAY is drawing. It's a cozy setting.)

MAY

I've waited long enough. Tell me your idea for the set of the play, Louisa.

LOUISA

Does it matter? Since we will be gone in a few weeks and the new play will never see the light of day. Or night.

MAY

It matters to me. I can still do some improvements on my settings and maybe Boston will have an old barn where can do our theatrics. Or we can do it in our new apartment/

LOUISA

The new apartment that won't even fit all of us.

MAY

Come on, Louisa. Let's just make-believe it is happening.

ANNA

She's right. It will take our minds off our leaving.

LOUISA

Why not? Your garden drawing struck me. You had all those vines and the long stems and outsized leaves. I wondered what the painting would look like if you did it all in grey and black tones.

MAY

No color????

LOUISA

No color.

MAY

I like things pretty. You told me I was a genius with color, remember?

LOUISA

So if you're already a genius with color, you should work on your weaknesses. Imagine if your weaknesses became your strengths. If you could do both form and color – why there would be no end to what you could paint.

MAY

Gardens need color. Right, Anna?

It is traditional.

ANNA

Let's buck tradition.

LOUISA

What do you think, Lizzie?

MAY

I think that both are interesting.

LIZZIE

That's not an answer.

MAY

You asked for my opinion. Don't ask if you don't like the answer.

LIZZIE

(LIZZIE and MAY make a face at each other.)

You should take your own advice. You write the same things over and over.

MAY

I do not! I write about counts and kings and slaves and peasants...

LOUISA

Who all kill each other. You're all about blood. Maybe you should write about what you know.

MAY

We're arguing about nothing. The playacting is done. We're never going to be able to perform Dickens' short story or whatever it is that you're scribbling now. We are destined for a mundane life.

ANNA

I'll have you know, I'm editing the poem. I intend to send it off tomorrow.

LOUISA

How many murders?

MAY

None.

LOUISA

How much blood?

LIZZIE

LOUISA

No blood. Just sunshine.

MAY

It's hard to believe that you have given up blood for sun.

LOUISA

I am merely taking my own advice and doing what you should be doing – working on my weaknesses.

ANNA

And ...

LOUISA

My sister liked it.

(ANNA and LOUISA share a smile. They go back to their activities.)

MAY

Why don't you read the poem to us?

LOUISA

No.

MAY

Are you worried we won't like it?

LOUISA

Not at all. But I am in a contrary mood where I think I should have the sun fall from the sky and burn everyone to a crisp. But my heart is not in it. My heart is not into anything right now.

(Everyone stops what they are doing. No one is in the mood for anything.)

MAY

Maybe we should play a game?

ANNA

Sorry. I'm just not in the mood.

LIZZIE

Shall I read to all of you? That always lifts our spirits.

ANNA

I'm reading a wonderful history of King Francis the First of France. He was a lover of art and started/

MAY

/Please, Anna! None of your histories tonight.

LOUISA

I'm afraid nothing can lift our spirits. We need something ... tangible. Something to hold onto. A plan of some sort. Yes, that's what I need – to devise a plan so we can stay here.

MAY

That's not going to happen.

LOUISA

Don't turn into Negative Nellie.

ANNA

She's right. There's nothing we can do to change Mother's or Father's mind. Nothing.

LOUISA

I'm not thinking of changing their minds. I'm thinking of changing their debt. Suppose we could find a way to decrease the debt? Then, we could stay here. Let's make a list of all the things we could do to earn money. Be creative. I bet I could work at the mill.

ANNA

They don't allow women.

LOUISA

Ha! They don't want to pay a woman a living wage. If a man can do it, I can do it.

ANNA

They'll take one look at your skirts and laugh you down the hill.

LOUISA

True. But I wonder if Alfie's family could use a farmhand. I could do that. Quick, May – write this down. "Louisa will look for farm work."

(MAY does so.)

Anyone else?

ANNA

So, if you are working in a farm all day, I suppose I could help mother with the sewing and laundering after teaching.

LOUISA

That's the spirit. Add that to the list, May. Let's take charge. Let's steer our own ship!

MAY

I could hem. My fingers are small and I make very even stitches. All of you have admired my embroidery.

LOUISA

Perfect.

MAY

How do you spell embroidery?

LOUISA

Just sound it out. These are great ideas. Our teapot is boiling hot.

LIZZIE

I can do laundry! It's not much different than cooking.

ANNA

No. We will need you to take care of the house while we are all working.

LIZZIE

I want to work!

ANNA

You have been taking care of all of us for how many years? Trust me, it's work. I took care of everyone during our year at Fruitlands. I remember.

LIZZIE

You all coddle me.

LOUISA

Not at all. We are a strong ship sailing to a land that's debt-free. You, Lizzie are our compass. You must stay put so we can check if we are going in the right direction. Are we together on this?

ALL OTHERS (Not in unison.)

Aye, Aye Captain!

(LOUISA Holds out her hand and gestures for the others to join her. They gather in a circle and they all touch hands.)

LOUISA

Let's sail our ship!

ALL

Hurrah!

(LIZZIE starts to sing softly and builds up steam.)

LIZZIE

Lightly row, lightly row
O'er the glassy waves we go

(SISTERS will join in.)

Smoothly glide, smoothly glide
On the silent tide.

ALL

Let the wind and waters be
Mingled with our melody.
Sing and float, sing and float
In our little boat!

(As the song wraps up, the lights will fade to black..)

----- OPTIONAL INTERMISSION -----

SCENE 6

(It is the next morning. ALFIE and LOUISA are outside the Alcott home.)

LOUISA

What do you think?

ALFIE

You want to be – a farm hand?

LOUISA

Why not?

ALFIE

A farm hand?

LOUISA

You know I am strong. Probably stronger than you. You know I work hard. Why not?

ALFIE

It's not seemly.

LOUISA

Balderdash. It's no more unseemly than slaving over a hot tub of dirty laundry every day.

ALFIE

But you'd get muddy.

LOUISA

I've been muddy. I lived.

ALFIE

I don't see my parents hiring you. I'm sorry. My mother would be mortified.

LOUISA

It's funny what mortifies people these days. A woman working in the field would be scandalous. But a family unable to put food on the table barely lifts an eyebrow.

ALFIE

It's not fair. I agree. But you're not going to change people.

LOUISA

I am not looking to change people. I am looking to earn an honest wage. Then we won't have to move to Boston.

ALFIE

There are other ways. Other ways of staying here.

LOUISA

I'm listening.

ALFIE

Have you perhaps thought about ... marriage?

LOUISA

No.

ALFIE

Oh. (*Pause.*) You're old enough.

LOUISA

Am I a spinster now?

ALFIE

NO! You're far too pretty for that.

LOUISA

Pretty is as pretty does. But thank-you for that.

ALFIE

I will inherit the farm someday. A farmer's wife is not a bad life.

LOUISA

Not at all. One day, someone will be lucky to have you.

ALFIE

This is not going as I planned. Please listen to me. Hear me out.

LOUISA

I'm listening.

ALFIE

I love you, Louisa. I have for some time now. I've only just beginning to realize it. I would give you a comfortable home. Time for you to write. I'd do anything/

LOUISA

/Please. No more. I care for you, Alfie. I always have and I always will.

ALFIE

But.

LOUISA

You're too good for me. I won't make you happy. I know that deep in my bones.

ALFIE

I don't agree.

LOUISA

You'll come around. You'll see the truth in this when you find the right person who will love you without pause, without equivocation.

ALFIE

I don't see it.

LOUISA

I do. Be patient. I don't want to lose you as a friend. You have been my dearest, closest companion for five years and at present, that is exactly what I need. Please let us stay close – as a brother and sister would be.

ALFIE

I'll... try.

(ANNA and JOHN enter.)

LOUISA

No tutoring today?

ANNA

The family heard we are leaving and quickly found a new teacher for the twins. Our plan is not going well. If anything, we now have less income than before. Hi, Alfie. Do you have any need of a few farmhands?

(LOUISA is trying to gesture to ANNA not to continue with the conversation.)

I'm not as strong as Louisa. And I don't care much for mud but I will do my best.

ALFIE

That's not exactly a ringing endorsement. I had best be on my way.

(ALFIE exits.)

ANNA

Did I say something wrong?

LOUISA

Let's just say that he doesn't need a farmhand but a wife would be acceptable.

ANNA

What?

LOUISA

Later. What do you think, John? Do you think I would be a suitable farmhand?

JOHN

I don't rightly see that. It's not traditional.

LOUISA

Oh thunderation. If we could overcome what is deemed "traditional," the world would be a finer place.

JOHN

I don't disagree. But my parents would. And they make all the decisions about the farm.

LOUISA

But you will inherit it one day. Surely you have some input.

JOHN

I don't wish to be farmer. It can go to my brother. I am happier in an office. Much cleaner.

(ELLEN and EDITH run on followed by EMERSON.)

ELLEN

Louisa! Have you finished the tale?

EDITH

Please say "yes." We've been guessing how it should end.

EMERSON

Excuse our interruption but the children insisted on seeing you. If now is not a good time, I shall whisk them away.

LOUISA

Actually now is the perfect time to tell a story about fairies and flowers. *(To ELLEN and EDITH.)* But you will have to help me.

EMERSON

Do you mind if I stay? I do love to watch a writer creating.

LOUISA

Oh! Nothing is fleshed out so I don't think it will hold any interest at this stage/

EMERSON

/Perfect! I love beginnings.

ANNA

As do I. Do you mind if John and I join you?

JOHN

If it wouldn't be too much trouble.

LOUISA

I'm sure you have better things to do than listen to a fairy tale.

JOHN

Actually ... I don't. And if it means I can steal a few more minutes with Anna ... and her sisters, I would be quite content.

LOUISA

I suppose... So, where were we?

(And EDITH and ELLEN quickly go through the opening.)

ELLEN

Once upon a time there was a beautiful fairy garden but there was a cruel Frost King nearby who did not like color so he killed all the flowers that he could see. One fairy, Violet goes to the Frost King to beg him to stop killing the flowers.

EDITH

You forgot about Primrose and Dairy/.

ELLEN

Oh yeah. They were selfish flowers and since their garden had not been ruined by the Frost Kings they decided it was someone else's problem and kept stuffing themselves with fairy dust tarts. Only Violet wanted to help. She goes to the Frost King. It's a scary trip – she goes through fields of dying flowers and makes it to the castle with its icy walls. She begged the King to let the flowers live but his heart was made of ice and orders her to leave.

EDITH

You forgot about the flower wreath.

ELLEN

Oh yeah. Violet brings him a delicate flower wreath and he kills it. And then he throws her in the dungeon.

EDITH

You forgot about the spiders.

ELLEN

Oh yeah. After, the Frost King orders her to leave, she goes through fields of dying flowers and sees spiders weaving beautiful webs. She makes friends with them.

EDITH

Do we need that? I would never make friends with a spider.

LOUISA

We'll see. I think it's charming. She could dance with them.

ELLEN

Anyway, the King is upset that she made friends with anyone and *then* he throws Violet in the dungeon.

(MAY comes rushing on with her little notebook and pencils.)

MAY

You're not supposed to start without me! How can I illustrate your book if I don't know what's going on.

LOUISA

But we haven't started.

MAY

Oh.

(MAY gets comfortable.)

I'm ready. Shall we begin? I have the drawing of the dungeon. What do you think?

EDITH

Ohh! It's wonderfully nasty.

MAY

Thank-you.

ELLEN

Really horrid and disgusting.

MAY

I try.

LOUISA

So Violet's in the dungeon. It's cold and damp with muddy floors. What should happen now?

ELLEN

She dies.

LOUISA

Did you want a tragic ending?

ELLEN

You're in a dungeon. What else could happen?

LOUISA

If I was in a dungeon I would try and claw my way out. I'd never give up.

JOHN

That's the spirit!

LOUISA

Yes. Well... Violet's in the dungeon with no way out but remember – she has something with her.

EDITH

Her flower wreath. But its dead. Just like she will be soon.

LOUISA

The flowers may be dead but maybe it's like in the winter when the flowers die but the roots survive.

MAY

Like this? It's just a rough sketch – but you inspired me.

EMERSON

Why that's very good.

MAY

It is, isn't it?

(LIZZIE enters.)

LIZZIE

Are we practicing for a show? Can I play?

EDITH

We're finishing up the story of Violet – a fairy who is dying a slow, painful, tragic death in a dungeon cell.

LIZZIE

How ... cheery. Is it filled with blood and guts?

EDITH

Oh no. It's a fable for children.

LIZZIE

I must see how this turns out.

(And LIZZIE joins them.)

LOUISA

All right. I didn't expect an audience.

ANNA

Louisa, you always command an audience.

LOUISA

Yes. Well, this really was just supposed to be a writing exercise for me, Edith and Ellen. But to continue. What would you do if you were in a muddy dungeon cell with a wreath of dead flowers?

ELLEN

Plant them!

EDITH

But how could she water them?

ELLEN

The dungeon is muddy.

EDITH

I know! I know! She is sad to be in a dungeon so in the evening, she cries to herself. And the tears fall on the flowers.

ELLEN

And they bloom again.

MAY

And they stretch into nooks and crannies all across the jail cell.

EDITH

Maybe they even stretch across the icy castle walls. Which melt.

ELLEN

And they make their way into the throne room.

EDITH

And the King sees them. Now what? He's so mean. He'd probably kill them all.

LOUISA

Maybe not. Maybe... he's never seen such beauty in his castle. Maybe the flowers sing to him. Maybe they offer sweet nectar for him to drink.

ELLEN

And all of that makes the King so happy that he frees Violet who goes home to her selfish fairies and everyone lives happily ever after.

LOUISA

It's a start. What do you think will happen to Violet once she returns home?

ELLEN

She's made Queen because she saved the flowers.

LIZZIE

She marries and has lots of fairy children and takes care of them and all the animals that come her way..

LOUISA

Including kittens?

LIZZIE

Especially kittens.

MAY

Or - she becomes an artist and becomes famous in fairyland for her beautiful flower paintings.

ANNA

Or ...she becomes a writer.

LOUISA

A writer. Yes, a writer would be nice.

EDITH

What do you think, Father?

EMERSON

I think you are all enchanted in the best possible way. (*To LOUISA.*) My daughters have loved helping you create these fables. How many do you have.

LOUISA

Six, I think.

EMERSON

You should think about publishing them.

LOUISA

I think about publishing everything. But the publishers think otherwise.

EMERSON

Your time will come.

LOUISA

I have no patience.

EMERSON

Work on that. Sometimes with writing, patience is more important than the actual work. How are things going for the move to Boston?

MAY

Oh, we're not moving to Boston. We're making other plans.

EMERSON

Oh. I wish you luck. With all of your plans – no matter what they are. Edith! Ellen! Let's take a walk in the woods. Let's work some of those twitchy muscles of yours before we settle in the for the night.

(EMERSON, EDITH and ELLEN exit.)

ANNA

Do you really have six of those stories?

LOUISA

Yes. We've been playing with these fables all year.

ANNA

Mr. Emerson's right. You should think about publishing them.

LOUISA

They're just for children.

ANNA

Children love to read. Oh. Forgot – here's the reason John and I joined you. You have mail.

LOUISA

A rejection.

JOHN

How do you know?

LOUISA

It's skinny. It's not like there's a check in there.

MAY

Open it.

LOUISA

I'm not in the mood.

LIZZIE

I picked some berries this morning. Let's gobble them up like greedy pigs. That will put you in good mood.

LOUISA

Why not?

(LOUISA and LIZZIE exit. MAY stays and draws ... and listens.)

ANNA

Thanks for keeping me company this afternoon. It helped to keep my mind off things.

JOHN

Is the move a certainty?

ANNA

It's looking like it. Our plans to earn extra money are not working.

JOHN

Will you ... visit?

ANNA

I get one day off every two weeks. Mother and Father will probably expect me to visit them.
(Beat.) Will you ... visit?

JOHN

I occasionally have the opportunity to do business in Boston. I will try. I was hoping to be part of your theatrical group. I thought I could maybe be ... a dashing lover?

ANNA

And I would be the sweet young thing in distress. And you – would save me.

JOHN

I wish I could... save you from Boston.

ANNA

I wish you could, too. It's funny. Once upon a time I dreamed of being an actress – the next Jenny Lind. I would work out of Boston. Louisa and I would travel together doing our melodramas. People would cheer and clamor for more and we would serve them up another one and another one. Of course, we would live in ratty little rooms but we wouldn't care because we would be the toast of the town wherever we went. Dreams are funny. None of that is coming true. Except for the ratty little rooms.

JOHN

Anna? Dare to dream another dream. Who knows? It may come true.

ANNA

Who knows? *(Beat.)* I should help with dinner. Feeling sorry for our situation won't change a thing. The family still needs to eat.

JOHN

I'll see you before you leave?

ANNA

I don't think it's for another week so there's time.

JOHN

Not a lot.

ANNA

No.

(And with an affectionate gesture between the two, JOHN exits and ANNA goes into her house. MAY stands and tears out her drawings and rips them up. The lights go to black.)

SCENE 7

(It is night time – after midnight. MAY comes downstairs with her paints. She either throws some paint on the curtains or paints them a bit manically with a brush. When she is done, LOUISA comes downstairs.)

LOUISA

Hello? Who is up at this time? Hello.... May! You should be in bed.

MAY

I was. I will go back now.

LOUISA

What are you doing?

MAY

Nothing.

LOUISA

The curtains... what have you done to the curtains?

MAY

I splotted paint all over them. I fixed it so we won't have to move. The Hawthornes will never want this house now. You said you had a plan. You said we wouldn't have to move.

LOUISA

I shouldn't have spoken until I was sure of the outcome. I gave you hope. Oh Maisey-May, I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry.

MAY

You're not the only one with a plan. My plan will work. You'll see. They're not getting the curtains so they won't get the house.

LOUISA

Oh my sweet, little baby sister – they'll just get new curtains.

MAY

I love it here. I'm not going to Boston. I'll live in our old barn with the kittens. I won't leave.

LOUISA

It's not forever.

MAY

I won't leave.

(LOUISA embraces MAY as the lights fade to black.)

SCENE 8

(It is the next morning. LOUISA, ANNA, and LIZZIE enter. They have been up since the early morning hours scrubbing the curtains.)

ANNA

It's no use. We can't get all the paint out.

LIZZIE

I'll try again in an hour. They just need to soak. They'll be fresher and newer by the time I'm done with them.

LOUISA

No, they won't.

(MRS. ALCOTT enters.)

MRS. ALCOTT

Good morning. Oh my – didn't we have more curtains?

LIZZIE

They're in the washtub.

MRS. ALCOTT

Is there more to this story?

LOUISA

Don't blame May.

(MAY enters.)

MAY

I did it. And I don't feel bad at all. You should have left them up with the paint splotches for the Hawthornes.

MRS. ALCOTT

Paint splotches?

MAY

I painted the curtains. They're really ugly now and we can't sell the house.

MRS. ALCOTT

Of course, we will sell the house. But we'll probably get less money for it.

LOUISA

It's my fault. I told May we wouldn't have to move. That I'd figure out something – I'd work in the mill or as a farmhand or something. I should have kept my mouth shut.

MRS. ALCOTT

That's always good advice.

LIZZIE

No, it's my fault. I heard May scurrying about and did nothing to stop her.

MRS. ALCOTT

I see. And Anna, is it your fault, too?

ANNA

I did see that May was nearby when I spoke to John about our plan not working. I should have been more careful.

MRS. ALCOTT

So, it's everyone's fault except for May. So, there was a plan?

LOUISA

Yes. I really thought I could get us out of debt.

MRS. ALCOTT

Don't you think I have worked the numbers every which way to see if we could stay? You can be headstrong, Louisa. Sometimes it's good to trust your mother. I'll see to breakfast.

(MRS. ALCOTT exits.)

ANNA

Now what?

LOUISA

We pack.

ANNA

What happened to yesterday's letter?

LOUISA

A rejection. We could do away with curtains and just wallpaper the room with my rejection slips.

LIZZIE

Throw them away.

LOUISA

I need the reminder.

LIZZIE

Anna's right. Get rid of them! We're moving. It's a fresh start. Don't cart around old rejection slips. You'll want room for the acceptances.

ANNA

She's right.

LOUISA

She's always right. It drives me crazy.

MAY

It's over, then?

LOUISA

Let's take a page from Lizzie's book. It's just beginning. Just think, you'll never have to see Charley again.

MAY

That's a good thought.

ANNA

And you two will continue to work on your fairy stories. I know children and they will love them.

LOUISA

We just have to get them published.

MAY

Which Louisa is not good at.

ANNA

Finish them! And get your new poem in the mail. Every time you get a rejection, counter it with a new submission. Believe that the new one will find a home.

LOUISA

I already sent it off. It's in today's mail.

(MR. ALCOTT enters.)

MR. ALCOTT

Good morning. *(Beat.)* Didn't we have curtains?

LIZZIE

They're in the wash.

MR. ALCOTT

That's the spirit! Thank you for helping to get everything fresh and ready for the new owners. I am off to town. Your mother has arranged for some families to pick up our beds. Apparently there is a need. And if there's a need, your mother will find it.

(MR. ALCOTT exits.)

LOUISA

All right. To work, Sisters! I'll go through the books. I know which ones I borrowed.

LIZZIE

I'll help mother pack up the kitchen. The kitchen is tiny in Boston and we won't have room for everything.

ANNA

I'll sort through the fabric. We can't afford to have dresses made anyway.

LOUISA

Save the light blue for you. You always look good in that color.

MAY

I could save everyone the trouble and just throw paint everywhere so that the Hawthornes would find the place unbearable.

ALL except MAY

NO!

MAY

Just a thought.

(The SISTERS go to work as the lights fade to black.)

SCENE 9

(Lights up on an emptier – but not empty home. Let’s just say, the clutter is gone And there are books piled up on the floor. The SISTERS are working diligently at packing. THOREAU, SOPHIA and NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE are there with the ALCOTTS. EMERSON is with LOUISA, JOHN is with ANNA while ALFIE is with LIZZIE and MAY.)

LOUISA

This is also yours.

(She looks at a big pile of books.)

I seemed to have borrowed quite a few. You must have missed them.

EMERSON

I am blessed to have a home filled with books. But I must say, I occasionally would look for a book and not be able to find it anywhere. I lend out quite a few books. It’s hard to remember which book went where.

LOUISA

You were my personal lending library.

EMERSON

That, my dear, is one of the nicest compliments I have ever received.

(And we switch to the HAWTHORNES and the ALCOTTS.)

MRS. ALCOTT

Everything is tagged. The Andersons will pick up the furniture tomorrow.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

But the dining room table and chairs are left for us.

MRS. ALCOTT

Yes, I made sure of that.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

Perfect.

MR. ALCOTT

We still have quite a few bookshelves here and upstairs.

HAWTHORNE

We prefer to bring our own. They are not – yet – sagging.

THOREAU

I'd be happy to take the sagging bookshelves. It would at least keep my books off the floor.

MR. ALCOTT

Sold!

SOPHIA

The lamps stay?

MRS. ALCOTT

Yes, but the kerosene is running low.

SOPHIA

And the candelabras?

MRS. ALCOTT

We are taking a few of course, but you will find more in the kitchen.

(We switch to ALFIE and MAY who are poring over MAY'S drawing books.)

ALFIE

These are quite good.

MAY

Of course.

ALFIE

Better than I expected.

MAY

I'm an Alcott. We're full of surprises.

LOUISA

Are you packing over there? Or just having a running critique on May's drawings?

ALFIE

We must go over everything to see what we pack and what we give away.

MAY

Don't believe him. I'm not parting with any of my work. We give away nothing.

LIZZIE

Maybe the tree with the ghosts.

MAY

Not that one! When I am famous, it will show that I was an imaginative child.

LIZZIE

Maybe this one – it's just scribbles. You must have been three or four.

MAY

Turn it over. You drew that. So it can go.

(LIZZIE may squirrel it away to save.)

JOHN

Everyone's so busy.

ANNA

We only have two more days to get this done.

JOHN

Still ... I don't think anyone would mind if we took a short break. Maybe a walk to the mailbox. Or further.

ANNA

Are you suggesting that we leave the work for everyone else?

JOHN

Yes.

ANNA

Is anyone watching?

JOHN

No.

ANNA

Let's make a run for it.

(And they do.)

EMERSON

What is this stuck between books? Is this something to be thrown?

(And he takes out a homemade dilapidated angel.)

LOUISA

There it is! This will never go to the compost. Mother made this angel for Anna and I when we were little. It goes on top of the Christmas tree.

EMERSON

It's had better days.

LOUISA

With a new piece of fabric and a needle and thread, I can make her as good as new. She is our past, present and now – our future. Sisters! Look what Mr. Emerson found squashed in the bookcases.

LIZZIE

Our sweet angel!

MAY

I wonder why she wasn't put into our Christmas box.

LOUISA

I think it was serendipity. That we were meant to find her today.

MRS. ALCOTT

I made it for you and Anna when you were babes. (*Beat.*) Where is Anna?

MAY

I think she sneaked out to smooch with John.

MRS. ALCOTT

What a thing to say.

LOUISA

Can't say I blame her.

LIZZIE

We are taking the angel. I will get her new ribbons for her halo. Remember our first Christmas here?

LOUISA

We didn't have a tree but Father cut down branches and plopped them in a pot.

LIZZIE

And we decorated them with cranberries and a few cookies.

LOUISA

And perched the angel on the tallest branch...

LIZZIE

Which kept falling over...

LOUISA

And we were afraid to put a candle on the branch because they were turning brown and Mother was afraid of a fire.

(ANNA and JOHN enter.)

ANNA

You found the angel! I wondered what happened to her. She needs help.

LOUISA

This will be the first project in Boston – fix our angel.

JOHN

I remember her on top of your tree last year.

MAY

That was the tree with the snake!

ALFIE

Oh I remember that. You wanted me to catch the snake. Remember when he slithered down when we were decorating?

LOUISA

I remember you jumping around like the floor was hot coals.

ALFIE

I tried to catch him.

LIZZIE

But you didn't.

ALFIE

No. Louisa did.

THOREAU

I can see Louisa as a snake-charmer.

LOUISA

It could have been worse. We could have brought a raccoon into the house.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

I take it the snake is gone.

MRS. ALCOTT

No worries there. It was released back into the woods.

LOUISA

Where it's lying in wait to return to us this Christmas.

MRS. ALCOTT

Louisa!

LOUISA

Sorry. Couldn't resist. He was harmless.

LIZZIE

We'll never have another Christmas here again. I wish I knew last year that it would be our last one. Then I would have memorized the candle glow...

MAY

The cookies we ate from the tree before the day began.

THOREAU

Those are sweet memories.

MR. ALCOTT

Yes. But before we get all maudlin, let's perk up and remember we are starting on a new adventure.

HAWTHORNE

I promise we will be good caretakers to your beloved home.

LOUISA

I know you will.

EMERSON

I must be off. The dinner gong will ring any minute.

LOUISA

Remember your books.

(LOUISA piles up books in EMERSON'S arms.)

Wait! There's more.

(And she piles up some more until we cannot see EMERSON.)

And more. *(Beat.)* Oh dear, I can be excessive.

THOREAU

I'll help get these home.

JOHN

As will I.

ALFIE

And I.

EMERSON

I hope you read all of these.

LOUISA

You know I did. Some of them became good friends.

EMERSON

Then their time here was well spent.

(Amid good-byes, EMERSON, MR. ALCOTT, THE HAWTHORNES, THOREAU, JOHN and ALFIE exit. The SISTERS come together in nostalgia and some sadness.)

MRS. ALCOTT

You all look so woebegone. Remember what your father said. “We are embarking on a new adventure.”

LIZZIE

I know. But I wish...

LOUISA

I know what she’s wishing.

ANNA

So do I.

MRS. ALCOTT

Tell me. You never know. Perhaps I can grant one last wish here.

MAY

She’s wishing for one more Christmas at Hillside, isn’t that so?

(LIZZIE nods her head, “yes” as the SISTERS come together.)

MRS. ALCOTT

I’ll make our first Christmas in Boston special. I promise.

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 10

(It is the next evening – the ALCOTTS last one in HILLSIDE. They are just finishing dinner. There may be boxes or the rooms are even a spit sparser than before. The family is quiet. Maybe all we hear is the noise of clinking eating utensils.)

MR. ALCOTT

We are all so quiet. Let's have a walk down memory lane. You're all thinking of the past, so let's give our thoughts breath. First, a toast to this rickety old barn of a house we have called "home."

ALL

Hear, hear!

MR. ALCOTT

What will you take from here?

LIZZIE

All the kittens that drew their first breaths in the barn. Mrs. Hawthorne said she would take care of them.

MRS. ALCOTT

And so she shall.

ANNA

I'll remember all the walks in the woods/

MAY

/with John/

ANNA

/sometimes. And the air and the sky and the newness of every day.

MAY

I'll remember the garden and the colors that changed every month from April through October.

MRS. ALCOTT

Louisa, what will you remember best?

LOUISA

That Father moved the shed over to the house and made a walk through so that I could have my own room to write. I'm not always a grateful daughter but my memory is strong.

MRS. ALCOTT

Speaking of writing, there was a letter in the post for you. From the Gazette.

LOUISA

That was fast.

ANNA

Open it.

LOUISA

It's skinny. A skinny letter within a week of sending the poem off only means one thing. "No, thank-you." I don't want to end tonight with a rejection. I'll save it for later.

(We hear singing outside the home.)

CAST (except for the ALCOTTS)

Here we come a-wassailing among the leaves so green,
Here we come a-wandering, so fair to be seen.

Love and joy come to you and to you your wassail, too,
And God bless you, and send you,
A happy new year, and God send you a happy new year.

(SOMEONE goes to the door and lets the carolers in. SOPHIA and NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE proceed to set the table as the ALCOTTS quickly clear their own. . EMERSON, EDITH and ELLEN may bear gifts ,ALFIE may have a tin of cookies, THOREAU may have some notebooks and JOHN may have some punch. Adjust according to your own whims. As they set up, they continue to sing.)

Bring us out a table, and spread it with a cloth;
Bring us moldy cheese and
Some of your Christmas load.

Love and joy come to you, and to you your wassail, too,
And God bless you and send you a happy new year.
And God send you a happy new year.

MRS. ALCOTT

Oh my! What goodness is this?

THOREAU

We couldn't send you off without a proper last Christmas?

EMERSON

And unlike the song, we do not expect moldy cheese. We have brought our own.

SOPHIA HAWTHORNE

All we need is the angel.

LOUISA

I'll get it!

(And LOUISA empties a box throwing its contents everywhere.)

EDITH

We brought goodies.

ELLEN

There's even some punch and cookies.

HAWTHORNE

I am sorry we couldn't arrange a Christmas goose.

EMERSON

And a few small presents to send you on your way.

(MAY goes to unwrap one.)

Not now. I want you to open these in Boston so you have something to look forward to. For now,
Eat, drink and be merry!

(Someone starts singing "Auld Lang Syne" and others slowly join in. Arrange what works best for your cast.)

CAST

Should old acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot
In the days of auld lang syne.

For auld lang syne, my dear
For auld lang syne
We'll drink a cup of kindness yet
For the sake of auld lang syne.

(The cast sings lower under the dialogue of ANNA and LOUISA ANNA has the letter.)

CAST

And surely you will buy your cup
And surely, I'll buy mine!
We'll take a cup of kindness yet
For the sake of auld lang syne

ANNA

Open it.

LOUISA

It's not a good time.

And surely you will buy your cup
Nd surely, I'll buy mine!

ANNA

Open it. I have a good feeling.

CAST (except LOUISA and ANNA)

We'll take a cup of kindness yet

(LOUISA opens it. A check falls out. She cans the letter.)

For the sake of auld lang syne.

We two who've paddled in the stream
From morning sun till night
The seas between us roared and swelled
Since the days of auld lang syne.

LOUISA
It's a check for fifteen dollars.
They're publishing my poem.
(LOUISA and ANNA hug.)

CAST (louder now and including ANNA and LOUISA)

For old acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
In the days of auld lang syne.

(The CAST is celebrating – all with good cheer.)

LOUISA

I'm published. I'm a published author. I'm going to Boston as a published author!

(And with whatever vignette you want to create to say "good-bye" to the audience, the lights will fade to black.)

END OF PLAY

