

V O W S

May's nightgown brushed her feet as she and her sister climbed the hill behind their house. They clipped enough pine branches to overflow their baskets. When Louisa started to turn back, May grabbed her arm and said, "We need more boughs to hide the cracks in the paint."

"No one will be looking at the walls." Louisa stepped away.

"Everyone will see the chipped paint and peeling wallpaper and pretend not to."

"Anna said she wanted to keep her wedding simple."

"And you believed her?" May broke another branch. But the sun was rising, and there was a lot to do before guests arrived, so she hurried behind Louisa back to the house. They twisted evergreen branches over windows they'd scrubbed with crumpled newspapers and vinegar. Then May brought lilies of

the valley upstairs. She twined the cream-colored flowers through Anna's hair. She fastened buttons on the back of her gray poplin gown, wishing her sister had chosen to wear white, like Princess Victoria, instead of stitching a dress she thought was more suitable for a bride who was turning thirty. May tossed her a soft, apple-sized bundle and said, "For you."

Anna unrolled the silk stockings, which wavered like smoke. "Thank you! But what an extravagance for something no one will see."

"You'll see them. So will your husband."

Anna's face turned pink.

May put on her best blue gown and arranged her light hair so it fell in waves between her shoulder blades. She hurried downstairs to help Father carry a table outside. She covered it with a cloth and set out the good green-and-white china, strategically placing plates over stains. She picked more lilies of the valley and slipped some through a buttonhole of Father's wrinkled linen frock coat.

"Mother will like that." May added, in case he forgot: "Her favorite flower."

She went into the kitchen to squeeze lemons, while Mother sliced bread on the board May had decorated years ago, using a hot poker to burn an impression of an Italian artist. She cringed at the amateurish attempt. Hearing hooves *clip-clop* and the rattle of wheels, she stepped outside to greet Mr. and Mrs. Emerson, who were lending their horses and carriage so the newlyweds could leave in style for their new home just north of Boston. May fetched a pail of water for the horses, made sure John didn't see his bride until the last moment, and welcomed

his family, other relatives, and a few neighbors. After collecting wedding presents, grape wine, and pies brought by guests, May glanced at the clock. Anna was superstitious and wanted to say her vows while the clock's hands swept up to eleven.

May showed people inside, hoping the crowded room might distract them from noticing the slanting floorboards and shabby furniture. And of course they'd be looking at Anna, who'd chosen to stand by John without a maid of honor. She'd said she didn't want to fuss, but May expected she wanted to avoid any rites that could stir sisterly rivalry. She stepped between Mother and Louisa, whose eyes were fixed on the picture of Beth, with violets twined around the frame. Louisa hunched the way she did over her paper and pen, her curved back a dare to interrupt. Still, May offered her hand. At least Louisa had been with Beth when she passed over, while she . . . No, she wouldn't think about why she'd been away, not as Anna and John took their places before Father and Uncle Samuel, who'd once been a minister, and who'd arrived from Syracuse yesterday and made May a kind but unappealing offer that she'd promised to reply to soon.

Father pushed his hair behind his shoulders. He said, "Let us pray," though the words that followed seemed more like an editorial on the wrongs between North and South. After the murmurs of *Amen*, Uncle Samuel spoke the vows. Anna looked into John Pratt's eyes. His sun-weathered face was framed by a brown beard and wavy hair. Anna leaned forward over her wide skirt for a kiss. When she turned and raised her hand with a slim gold ring, people rushed forward with blessings and congratulations.

May cheered the loudest. She'd once imagined a more brilliant match for her oldest sister, but John was good, handsome, and dependable, which wasn't a romantic word, but one dear to daughters whose father scorned making money, which he believed could corrupt, tied as it was to evils such as slavery. Who could argue, but May had hated going hungry and wearing cast-off clothing, and she was certain Anna had, too. Father had a deep, persuasive voice, but he'd never convince May that a pumpkin was as good as a throne or a wreath of daisies as splendid as a tiara.

She held open the door, then followed everyone into the yard, which was scented by lilacs. Already conversations were turning from the short ceremony to the war some predicted would break out between the states soon or whether the lemonade was sweet enough. Louisa had her eyes on Mr. Thoreau's shaggy beard, which looked as if it had been trimmed with a penknife. Wearing a straw hat, threadbare coat, and trousers tucked into scuffed boots, he kept his eyes on the ground, as if scouting for mushrooms. May was fond of the man who years before had taught her and other children the names of wildflowers. Mr. Thoreau stopped by in early spring to announce when the bluebirds had returned. But he was awfully short, and one of the few people in Concord who might be poorer than the Alcotts. Louisa, who was canny about so much, couldn't seem to see that a middle-aged man who lived with his mother and couldn't look a woman in the eye or anywhere else wasn't one to pin her hopes on.

May took her aside. "It was a lovely wedding, though I'm not going to get married in a parlor. Or a backyard."

“The sky is church enough,” Louisa said.

“But not as reliable as a ceiling. Thank goodness it didn’t rain.” May thought stained glass flattered a bride. And she’d make sure her mother wouldn’t be clearing tables at her wedding. She said, “Father must have been more pliable when Mother convinced him to marry in King’s Chapel.”

“Mother’s pleased that Anna chose to marry on their anniversary.”

“I just wish they were taking a real honeymoon.”

“They’re wise to save their money.”

May wasn’t opposed to them being practical. Marrying in a breathless rush was no proof of ardor. “But I wanted more for her.”

“She has tenderness and loyalty.”

“You want more than that. Why shouldn’t she?” May wondered if Louisa buttoned conversations with morals only with her younger sister. She wished she didn’t speak as if she hadn’t seen the bleak apartment Anna and John were renting, where they’d scrubbed windows bound to blacken with the next passing train. Of course May was glad that John cherished Anna, but was she the only Alcott who understood that love needn’t be the opposite of good fortune? At twenty-one, May felt ready to end her flirtations and get serious about finding a man who might not be the prince she’d once dreamed of, but who would take her to tour art museums in Paris and ruins in Rome. She wasn’t in a hurry, for it was nicest for older sisters to marry first. But she wished Louisa would get to work.

“What are you doing talking to me when you could be with Mr. Thoreau? Look, he’s taking out his flute.” May grabbed Louisa’s hand and pulled her toward the guests who

danced in the old German style around the elm tree, skipping, twisting, swinging their arms. Louisa laughed and kicked higher than anyone else, until May swung her legs still higher.

The dancers dropped each other's hands. The circle unwound. Mr. Thoreau put down his flute, then coughed while bending into a handkerchief, which he unfolded and inspected. May turned to the table where the linen napkins were now crumpled. Crumbs littered the tablecloth. The signs of polishing, ironing, and bleaching she'd done to show this day mattered had disappeared. She stacked the scattered teacups that came from Mother's family and were printed with *M*'s, which made her hopeful that one day she, rather than her sisters, might inherit them, though that wasn't why she'd recently asked to be called by Mother's maiden name as well as her and Louisa's middle name. "May" was prettier than "Abigail." She carried the cups and plates through the parlor, where the pine garlands smelled more fragrant as they wilted.

She returned outside and stood by Louisa, watching John gently touch Anna's waist as they headed to the carriage. Anna lifted her skirt to climb up, showing a glimpse of stocking.

"Gracious, where did she get those?" Louisa said.

"Do you think she'll tell us what it's like?" May asked.

"The truth about marriage? No one tells that."

"I was hoping for just the wedding night. You'll confide in me, won't you?"

"You might tell me."

"Mother says you just need to find the right man. But we shouldn't wait too long. We could help watch each other's babies. Imagine cousins playing croquet or skating together.

But first there's the marriage. How good it must be to live with someone who knows everything about you."

"That sounds like a sister more than a husband."

May caught her breath. Did Louisa really think she knew her? "I never felt I knew much about Beth. She seemed patient, then had such spells."

"Let's not talk about her today. First I lose her, now Anna."

"Aren't you going back to Boston? You'll be closer to Anna there than you are here." May had sometimes felt jealous of the bond between her two oldest sisters, who were just about a year apart in age, and nine and eight years older than she. Maybe she and Louisa would become closer now that they were the sisters yet to marry.

People cheered as the horses began pulling the carriage, where Anna and John sat close. Louisa kicked off her shoes, grabbed May's hand, and raced behind them, shouting, "Farewell!"

They ran until the carriage was nearly out of sight and they were out of breath. They turned and headed home, stopping by the house next to their own, where they'd lived some fifteen years ago. They had moved about once a year when they were growing up, as Father looked for work, loans, or distance from people to whom he owed money.

"Of all the places we lived, I loved this house most." Louisa kept her eyes on the house that was now shuttered. Ladders leaned against the walls. "The Hawthornes were wise to have the roof repaired before they return from Europe. Mr. Hawthorne won't want to write while hearing hammering over his head."

“Mr. Wetherbee isn’t just replacing slates,” May said. “See how they took out the garret and are adding some sort of turret? What’s wrong?”

“They can’t take down the garret! That’s where we played! Don’t you remember? I suppose everything’s gone now. That chest filled with old clothes and boots we used for dress-up.”

“For those theatricals you wrote? I always got roles like the castle cat.”

“You wouldn’t learn your lines.”

“I must have been five. You couldn’t expect a professional actress.” May linked her arm through Louisa’s as they headed home. “Now you can see real productions.”

“Our cousins are generous with tickets they can’t always use. Don’t tell Mother, but I think of Boston as my home now. I find ideas there. I can hardly write about women who bring soup to sick neighbors or the trials girls have with lemonade-stained gloves.”

“I want to live in Boston, too. I could take art classes again. Lu, we could share a room!”

“I thought Uncle Samuel found you a job in Syracuse.”

“He meant well, offering me a place with his family so I can send home the money I earn. But I don’t want to teach at a sanitarium, no matter how refined he says it is. That spa in Maine where Mother worked was probably called ‘elegant,’ too.” May had been seven when she accompanied her mother, who’d been hired to help with water cures. She remembered hollow-eyed women sinking into warm baths in narrow tubs, then bracing themselves against hoses that sprayed cold water.

Louisa stopped at the gate Father had built from branches.

“Anyway, I’m not looking for a roommate. Annie Fields, our second, or is it third, cousin, offered me a place with them.”

“I know who Mrs. Fields is. She’s famously pretty and married to that editor who must be twenty years older. Isn’t he the one who sent back your story with advice to stick to your teaching?”

“To emphasize his point, he offered to loan me forty dollars to start a kindergarten. The worst part is that I can’t refuse. I hate being the poor relation, but I’ll save on rent. I mean to pay back that loan as soon as I can.”

“You’d rather live with them than me? I want the freedom of a city, too.”

“But Mother’s relatives are everywhere. I went to the Parker House for coffee after a meeting, and the next morning, half the family knew I’d been seen dining with two men.”

“You never told me.”

“We were discussing abolition.”

May was glad that perhaps Louisa didn’t pin all her hopes on Mr. Thoreau. “I could help you cook and mend and . . .”

“No. It’s not like when you were a girl and you widened your eyes, shook your curls, and got your way.”

“That’s what I want to show you. You don’t know me now that I’ve grown up.”

“Maybe. I’m impressed that you’d even consider working with deranged or delicate girls. But Mother needs you here.”

May looked at the brown clapboard house, where she’d now be the only daughter. She said, “Though I might do some good helping those poor girls in Syracuse.”