

Louisa@Fruitlands

The True Story of Louisa May Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats"

A Two-Act Play ©2023 Daniel Rover Singer
Contact: Roverzone@gmail.com

1862: 29-year-old Louisa May Alcott has successfully sold some lurid adventure stories to a publisher. But when challenged to write something more personal, she resists. Recalling how her quirky family had optimistically joined an experimental farm commune when she was an imaginative but rather feral ten-year-old, Louisa reflects on how much she matured, as a person and a writer, as a result of her bizarre summer among the philosophers at Fruitlands.

NOTICE!

Your use of this script acknowledges that you agree, under penalty of prosecution, that it shall remain confidential and proprietary, and shall not be shared, duplicated or distributed in any manner. This play shall not be performed, filmed, interpreted, translated, published or used in any manner without the written permission of the author, and in most cases, payment of a royalty. Representation: Jonathan Mills @Paradigm Agency (212) 897-6400 jmills@paradigmagency.com.

CHARACTERS: (11 actors: 7 men, 3 women, 1 child)

**All characters are historically white except Hiram Jones, African-American*

***Any-race casting always recommended*

****It's possible for 1 actress to play both LOUISA and ABBY. Some of those character changes would happen instantly onstage, so it would be vital for there to be significant, obvious differences in voice, body language, and a simple costume change (like a bonnet and/or apron).*

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, 29, a vivacious writer
YOUNG LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, 10, a melodramatic child
BRONSON ALCOTT, 44, an esoteric philosopher, teacher & father
ABBY ALCOTT, 43, wife, mother & activist
RALPH WALDO EMERSON, 40, a sage philosopher
HENRY DAVID THOREAU, 26, a radical philosopher
JOSEPH PALMER, 54, 73, a progressive farmer
NANCY PALMER, 58, 77, a spirited wife
HIRAM JONES, 38, a diligent farmhand, formerly enslaved
WOOD ABRAHAM, 35, an eccentric farmhand
CHARLES LANE, 43, a charismatic British reformer
SHERIFF (*played by Thoreau*)

The action takes place in rural Massachusetts 1843-1862 at a Concord Meeting Hall, the Fruitlands farmhouse kitchen/common room and attic, a field, a barn, a forest, and a jail cell.

OVERTURE: *The COMPANY, hidden backstage, sings an a cappella arrangement of Stephen Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More." We hear harmonies but the overall quality is unprofessional, like churchgoers singing a hymn.*

ALL:

(VERSE) LET US PAUSE IN LIFE'S PLEASURES AND COUNT ITS MANY TEARS,
WHILE WE ALL SUP SORROW WITH THE POOR;
THERE'S A SONG THAT WILL LINGER FOREVER IN OUR EARS;
OH! HARD TIMES COME AGAIN NO MORE.

(REFRAIN) 'TIS THE SONG, THE SIGH OF THE WEARY,
HARD TIMES, HARD TIMES, COME AGAIN NO MORE.
MANY DAYS YOU HAVE LINGERED AROUND MY CABIN DOOR;
OH! HARD TIMES COME AGAIN NO MORE.

Act I, Scene 1: The Fruitlands Farmhouse Kitchen/Common Room in Rural Massachusetts, 1862, then 1843

(PALMER (73), a farmer in overalls with a long grey beard, and NANCY (78), his feisty wife, enter as LOUISA (29), in a plain, hoop-skirted dress, enters mirthfully at the front door.)

LOUISA:

View halloo, anybody home?

PALMER:

Of course we're home. Where else would we be?

LOUISA:

I don't know. Fighting the war, I suppose?

NANCY:

Louisa! You didn't tell us you were coming!

LOUISA:

I love popping in as if I were family. I know, the Alcotts only lived here seven months, but it might as well have been seven *years*. So many *intense* memories.

PALMER:

Any good news in the world?

LOUISA:

Oh you know, the war rages on. I've spoken out at abolitionist meetings but if you're a woman, you may as well be invisible. Don't worry, that hasn't stopped me. I write to President Lincoln every week; I go to all the suffragist rallies...

NANCY:

Louisa, how’s your mother? I miss her so!

LOUISA:

She’s fine, sewing away while Father talks to anyone who’ll listen, just like always. But I’ve started earning my own money. I’m selling my stories to magazines! I’m a real, *published* writer now!

NANCY:

Let me guess: melodramas full of ghosts and murderers?

LOUISA: (*hands NANCY a magazine*)

That’s what sells. I brought one for you to read: “The Spy Wore a Uniform.” I think I was ten when I started it. You’ll hate it.

(Enter another LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, 10, looking rough in a dirty play-dress and speaking grandly to the audience. The others do not see her.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Yes, it’s ME, the renowned LOUIS M. ALCOTT, the greatest writer since Shakespeare! Thank you! (*Beat*) You may rise. (*She hammily acknowledges the accolades of her imaginary audience.*)

NANCY: (*glances at the magazine*)

I wish you’d consider writing something more pleasant.

LOUISA:

I don’t know any pleasant stories.

(YOUNG LOUISA has moved behind a lectern—probably standing on a wooden box if she is small—at one of the downstage corners. This lectern will remain throughout the play. She starts scribbling with a large pencil.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

“A story by Louis M. Alcott: *The Spy Wore a Uniform*. A thrilling tale of murder and... and *more* murder.”

NANCY:

What about Joseph? Persecuted for wearing a beard, when the whole county attacked him for it.

LOUISA:

That’s true.

PALMER:

Nancy, hush. I'm just a farmer.

NANCY:

"Just a farmer"? *Pshaw*. You fought to improve conditions for prisoners. You joined a band of world-famous mystics who accidentally invented their own religion. You made a success of this glorious farm after such a tragic beginning. We're hosts on the Underground Railroad. And you think you're just a farmer?

YOUNG LOUISA:

"Beneath the silvery stars, the spy secretly sneaked into the city to steal several solid-gold..." Ugh... too many "S"s. (*She crosses out her writing.*)

NANCY:

You could write about your family. You and your sisters were so close.

LOUISA:

A story about my silly old sisters? Really? "Once upon a time, there were four boring little girls. They argued all the time and... and I suppose they all fell in love with boys. The end!" (*Laughs*) Can you imagine? (*Sighs.*) I've tried. I've tried to write about my family. I just can't. Since Lizzie died, I—well, it's just too painful to think about. My pen just... freezes.

PALMER:

Such a different Louisa.

LOUISA:

What do you mean?

PALMER:

You were an ungovernable fury. Fearless.

LOUISA:

When?

PALMER:

When I met you.

LOUISA:

I was feral when I was ten. Selfish and shallow and contrary... utterly discontented. It's embarrassing to think about.

NANCY: (*handing the magazine back*)

Well, I'm *done* reading stories by ten-year-old Louisa. I want to see what grown-up Louisa has to say.

(NANCY and PALMER exit as the LIGHTS CHANGE. LOUISA steps Downstage into the same realm as YOUNG LOUISA.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

What is your problem? You were a better writer when you were ten.

LOUISA:

You're not a writer. You're just a wild animal who reads a great deal of lurid fiction and regurgitates it.

YOUNG LOUISA:

That's what YOU do.

LOUISA:

It's too painful to write about our family.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Agreed.

LOUISA:

But it'll help.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Help what?

LOUISA:

It's time we started writing like a... a real person. The characters in our adventure stories are nothing but... pasteboard puppets. *We can do better.* Let's try telling it... together.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ugh. "The Misadventures of Those Crazy Alcotts."

LOUISA:

For now, let's just call it "Fruitlands."

YOUNG LOUISA:

My title's better.

(LOUISA gestures for YOUNG LOUISA to take the stage. YOUNG LOUISA begrudgingly hands LOUISA the pencil and moves Center. Enter BRONSON ALCOTT (44) and ABBY ALCOTT (43). They address YOUNG LOUISA from opposite sides.)

BRONSON:

Louy!

ABBY:

Louy!

YOUNG LOUISA:

Leave me alone! I’m writing. (*She dictates to LOUISA, who begins scribbling.*) “A day in the life of Louy M. Alcott, age ten. May, 1843. Today I woke up to find that I am *still* a girl, unsurprisingly. Another day of doing chores and arguing with sisters.”

BRONSON:

Louy, don’t write about everyday distractions. Let your imagination soar!

ABBY:

Louy, come to the kitchen and help with the chores.

BRONSON:

Behold the birds in the trees! Why do they sing? Because they’re joyous! They don’t worry about the world! Let us be like the birds.

ABBY:

Louisa, you mustn’t take your father so literally. He’s a philosopher. We can’t pretend to be birds all day. We have to get things done!

YOUNG LOUISA: (*dictating*)

“Chapter One: My Annoying Parents. My father ponders the meaning of life all day long. Ponder, Ponder, Ponder. He opened his own school. Everyone wanted to come, because it was the latest thing!”

BRONSON: (*to audience*)

You won’t be needing those antiquated lesson-books, children! Nature is our textbook! Now take off your shoes and stockings before we go outside. You’re going to write an essay on how we feel the spirit of the Earth when dirt gets between our toes!

YOUNG LOUISA:

A few weeks later, *wham!*—those happy kids were yanked out of there and put back in boring, traditional schools. It was a scandal. (*Dictates*) “People call my father a crackpot. My mother—”

ABBY:

You’re covered with dirt from head to toe. You can’t just run around getting dirty. You’re not a boy.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I wish I *was* a boy! Boys get to do whatever they want. Get dirty, fight, shout, and never get scolded for it. It’s not fair.

ABBY:

And those awful books and plays you read! Life is not a silly melodrama.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Oh but it is! Grown-ups are ridiculous! Just like the characters in novels. They're completely unbelievable.

ABBY:

You can't spend your life chasing pirates, swooning over princes and dancing at imaginary balls.

YOUNG LOUISA:

This week I'm a SPY. If the enemy catches me, I'll disguise myself as Don Emilio Sanchez, Duke of Ferranzo!

ABBY:

Oh for heaven's sake, stop that!

YOUNG LOUISA:

How else will I become the finest actor the world has ever known? Or a novelist who writes the sensational dramas everyone's talking about?

BRONSON:

I'm sure you'd rather be a teacher. Play-acting is such a dishonest profession.

ABBY:

Wash your face and hands and help me with the laundry.

YOUNG LOUISA:

But I'm only ten! It's my job to be a child! (*Yells in frustration*) AAAUGHHH!

(YOUNG LOUISA runs a figure-eight around her parents.)

ABBY:

What's the matter now?

BRONSON:

I believe she may have been a deer or a horse in some former life.

ABBY:

Nonsense. She's reckless! I fear for her safety.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*stops DC*)

Ooh, reckless! That's how I want to be known: "The Mysterious Louis M. Alcott, Reckless Spy," how thrilling! (*In a low voice*) How dangerous!

ABBY:

Oh! I give up. This child's impossible.

BRONSON:

Well, we have three more daughters. Perhaps we'll have better luck with them.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I have three sisters. I want to kill them all. Anna and I are always competing for attention; Lizzy actually *gets* all the attention because she's so perfect and sweet; and May's only three, and everyone *must* dote on the baby. Things would be so much simpler if I were an only child. Life is so unfair! *(Begins to run a circle.)*

BRONSON: *(finally checking his pocket-watch)*

It's almost time for the meeting. Shall we go?

YOUNG LOUISA: *(halting)*

You want me to go to the Sunday meeting?

BRONSON:

Why not? Perhaps you'll learn something.

ABBY:

But you can't be shouting and interrupting. You must sit quietly and listen.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ugh, I'd rather die.

ABBY:

Louy! That's not funny! You shouldn't say such things. Now come here!

(ABBY wipes dirt from YOUNG LOUISA's face with a corner of her apron as we transition to...)

Act I, Scene 2: A Meeting House in Concord, Massachusetts

(Enter WOOD ABRAHAM (35), an eccentric farmer, with four small benches, which he sets down in two rows. Enter CHARLES LANE (43), a charismatic Englishman, who greets the ALCOTTS. BRONSON is warm to him but ABBY is cool. LOUISA narrates to the audience from the lectern.)

LOUISA:

"In a humble meeting-hall in small-but-mighty Concord, Massachusetts, historic birthplace of American revolution, there met a group of free-thinking individualists

with the devoutest faith in the high ideal of a true, living Paradise... where Beauty, Virtue, Justice, and Love might live happily together."

YOUNG LOUISA:

Really? Ugh! You don't need all that flowery junk. Get to the point, like this: (*Dictates*) "The Trans-cen-dentalists meet here every week. I've heard people say they're a lot of crackpots, but I've never been allowed to see for myself. Father's here every Sunday, along with that very pale Englishman Charles Lane. Isn't he a fascinator? He runs a school in London using my father's reform principles! I hope HIS stays open! Mr. Lane's been living with us for months; I have no idea why, but I *adore* his accent."

LANE:

Miss Louisa, who are you talking to?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I was just... thinking out loud.

LANE:

How very American of you. Your private thoughts should remain private. That's good manners.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I wish there was more profit in good manners.

LANE:

The reward for proper behavior is everlasting paradise.

YOUNG LOUISA:

No, I meant *money*. Just imagine if every time I said 'please' I got a penny. I'd be rich!

LANE:

Someday you'll understand the rewards of a well-lived life, Miss Louisa. By-the-by, you have coffee grounds in your hair. (*He greets ABRAHAM.*)

YOUNG LOUISA: (*aside*)

See what I mean? He doesn't miss anything!

(Enter RALPH WALDO EMERSON (40), who greets the ALCOTTS and LANE.)

LOUISA:

That's my father's best f—

YOUNG LOUISA:

No, shush! Let me! (*Aside*). That's my father's best friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Yes, *that* Ralph Waldo Emerson! He's famous, even though he's just another philosopher. I've known him since I was a baby! —Uncle Waldo!

EMERSON:

Louy!

(She goes to EMERSON, who is delighted to see her. He bends so she can kiss his cheek.)

EMERSON:

Why aren't you at home with your sisters?

YOUNG LOUISA:

My folks seem to think I might learn something here. What's a Transcendentalist?

EMERSON:

Well... That's rather hard to explain to a child.

ABBY:

Especially *this* child.

EMERSON:

Louy, do you ever contemplate your soul's relationship to the universe?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Nope! I'm too busy running.

EMERSON:

Louy, try to be serious for a moment. I want you to consider: everything in the world is made up of tiny particles. Our bodies, the trees, the water, the stones... Everything is made out of those same particles.

YOUNG LOUISA:

You mean WE are made out of the same things that trees are made of?

EMERSON:

Yes. What happens to our bodies when we die?

YOUNG LOUISA:

We're buried in the ground.

EMERSON:

If you plant an apple tree in the ground, it feeds on the soil as it grows. Our bodies return to the particles we're made of, and those particles feed the tree.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*struggling*)

And then we eat the apples? And those particles become—become—

EMERSON:

Our souls are always present, no matter how the particles are arranged.

YOUNG LOUISA:

So I should feel the tree inside me? And does the tree feel *me* inside of *it*?

EMERSON:

What do you think?

YOUNG LOUISA: (*overwhelmed*)

It's too hard to understand!

BRONSON:

Allow me. (*Emphatically*) As your heart pumps its eternal systole and diastole, incarnating organ and vessel in its mystic flow, creation's self ebbs into chaos and invisibility: a spiritual quintessence.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Papa, I couldn't understand a single word you said.

EMERSON:

Never mind, Louy. Anytime you have a difficult question, come to *me*, yes?

(She hugs EMERSON; he kisses her forehead. ENTER HENRY DAVID THOREAU (26), confident and serene.)

Ah, here's Mr. Thoreau. Louisa, I want you to meet him. Henry, this is Miss Louisa May Alcott.

(YOUNG LOUISA shakes his hand aggressively.)

ABBY:

Louisa! Curtsey, don't shake the man's arm off.

THOREAU:

I'm pleased to meet you, Louisa. Mr. Emerson's told me all about you. You're the wildest of the Alcott girls. Did you really break that window with your head on purpose?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Yes. I wanted to know which was harder.

THOREAU:

I see, empirical evidence.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Are you a philosopher too?

THOREAU:

Yes. Mr. Emerson’s given me permission to meditate near his pond.

YOUNG LOUISA:

What does “meditate” mean?

THOREAU:

I sit and contemplate nature.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Wow! That sounds incredibly boring!

ABBY:

Shhh!

THOREAU:

Ha! And I like to play my flute.

YOUNG LOUISA:

For an audience?

THOREAU:

Ye—s, the *forest* is my audience. You should come for a visit.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Don’t philosophers have to work?

EMERSON:

We write books. Sometimes people actually buy them.

THOREAU:

My family has a little factory. We make pencils. Would you like a pencil?

(He gives YOUNG LOUISA a pencil. She curtseys and takes it.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Thank you! I’m going to write a book with it!

THOREAU:

Really! What about?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I call it “The Phantom’s Revenge.” It’s about a New England family that’s haunted by the ghost of a murderer. You can be in it.

THOREAU:

I’d rather not. Forgive me, but it sounds like dreadful trash.

YOUNG LOUISA:

You haven’t even read it yet.

THOREAU:

I don’t need to. You must aspire to loftier subjects, Louisa. Renounce the petty squabbling and gossip that turns men and women into demons. You must experience solitude, as I do, and write your deepest personal reflections. The myriad colors and textures of the forest—its sounds, its smells. Every moment in nature is full of fascinations. And then—just beyond—is another realm of perception waiting to be explored.

YOUNG LOUISA:

What do you mean? Beyond what?

THOREAU:

Ah, beyond what? Indeed!

(With a mysterious look, THOREAU plays a tune on his flute.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

You’re a very queer person!

ABBY:

Shh, Louisa! —I’m sorry...

(ABBY pulls YOUNG LOUISA aside to chastise her. ENTER JOSEPH PALMER (54), a solid-looking farmer with a long, attractive beard and neatly cut hair. He’s a calm, pleasant, stoic fellow wearing overalls. With him is his skeptical but supportive wife NANCY PALMER (59) and their Black farmhand HIRAM “JONESY” JONES (38).)

NANCY:

Joseph, please let’s discuss it further.

PALMER:

I ain’t about to change my mind.

NANCY:

I’m sure these folks are well-intentioned but you shouldn’t make rash decisions based on—

PALMER:

This ain’t no rash decision. I been meetin’ with these fellers for thirteen years, and I firmly believe in what they’re planning.

EMERSON:

Good afternoon Mr. Palmer, Mrs. Palmer, Mr. Jones.

PALMER & NANCY:

Hello.

JONESY:

Afternoon, Mr. Emerson, Mr. Thoreau. And who’s this?

ABBY:

This is our daughter, Louisa May.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*curtseys*)

I’m pleased to meet you.

NANCY:

Such lovely manners.

ABBY:

For a change.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*to Jonesy*)

Do you belong to Mr. and Mrs. Palmer?

ABBY:

Ugh! Louy, don’t be rude!

JONESY:

I’m not offended, Mrs. Alcott.

PALMER:

Jonesy’s a free man. He works on my farm.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*turning to PALMER*)

Oh. I thought whiskers were forbidden.

PALMER:

Where’d ye get that notion?

YOUNG LOUISA:

From storybooks. The only men with beards are villains. Sinners.

PALMER:

I'm just a farmer and I ain't no sinner. Nothing wrong with growing a beard.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Are you a Transcendentalist?

PALMER:

I reckon so. Been comin' to these lectures nigh on thirteen years. I don't hold with traditional religion.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Why not?

NANCY:

That's a long story, and not for children.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Oh. Your beard is beautiful. May I touch it?

PALMER:

You may. *(He leans down; she strokes it tentatively.)*

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ooh! I should like a winter coat made of it.

PALMER:

Ha! Well, if'n it goes missin', I'll know who to come lookin' for.

NANCY: *(to ABBY)*

Abigail, psst! May I speak to you?

(NANCY gestures to ABBY, who nods, and the two step aside to chat.)

ABBY:

How is everything, Nancy?

NANCY:

Oh, everything's as settled as a hurricane. Joseph's about to sell our farm, and I can't talk him out of it.

ABBY:

Why? What's happened?

NANCY:

It's what's *about* to happen! Hasn't Bronson told you?

ABBY:

No, told me what?

EMERSON:

Let's take seats, everyone! Time to begin!

NANCY:

Never mind, we'll all know soon enough.

ABBY:

Bronson, what is it? What's going on?

BRONSON:

Take your seat, my dear. You too, Louy.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I want to sit in the front, Marmee.

ABBY:

No, sit here next to me, and don't say a word.

(Everyone sits on benches facing Upstage. BRONSON ALCOTT goes to the podium, where he clears his throat.)

BRONSON:

Welcome everyone! “The foregoing generations beheld God and Nature face-to-face. Why should not *we* also enjoy an original relationship to the Universe? Let us demand our *own* works and laws and worship.” These words, extracted from the profound essay “Nature,” were written by the world's champion of Individualism. His words shatter the conventions that keep the souls of men bound up, thereby freeing us to soar. Please welcome my dear friend, Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson.

(Applause as BRONSON sits and EMERSON takes the podium.)

EMERSON:

Society destroys our Wholeness. To regain our Wholeness we must commune with Nature, separated from the flaws and distractions imposed on us by Society. *Solitude* is the single mechanism through which we can be fully engaged in the world of Nature. If a man would be alone, let him look to the stars.

(WOOD ABRAHAM stands. He clearly suffers from some mild mental disorder.)

ABRAHAM:

Mr. Emerson, I'd like to join your brotherhood of Transom... mentalists.

BRONSON: *(rising, concerned but polite)*

And who might you be, sir?

ABRAHAM:

Name's Wood Abraham. Used to be Abraham Wood, but I done switched 'em around. I used to read Mr. Emerson's essays in the Asylum.

BRONSON:

The... Asylum?

ABRAHAM:

The County Asylum, sir. I was a patient there when I was poorly. I'm better now, God damn it.

(Audience is a tad shocked at his swearing.)

BRONSON:

Sir, we'll have no coarse language here. Or drinking.

ABRAHAM:

Oh, I ain't drunk—I jus' talks like that. I always had an indivifisicallistic relationship with God, so I thought I'd be a good fit with you folks.

BRONSON:

That's fine. Now please sit down, Mr. Wood...

ABRAHAM: *(sitting)*

Mr. Abraham.

BRONSON:

Yes, I'll speak to you after the meeting. Pray forgive the interruption, Mr. Emerson. Continue.

EMERSON:

I brought with me tonight the extremely thoughtful young man I've taken under my wing. He embraces the ideals we hold dear and expresses them better than any man I've met. Please welcome my young friend, Henry David Thoreau.

(Polite applause as EMERSON sits and THOREAU rises and takes the podium.)

THOREAU:

It is not enough to believe the evidence presented by our senses. An ideal spiritual state transcends, or goes beyond, the physical and empirical, and one achieves that insight through personal intuition rather than religious doctrine. Because of this, one of our critics called us Transcendentalists. I think he meant it as a rude joke. But it’s a perfectly good word, so here we are using it. We *transcend* everyday things when we immerse ourselves completely in the Natural World. Then, through quiet introspection, along with simple living and self-sufficiency, we can discover the spirit that Nature reveals. Only then can we imagine the Divine. Thank you.

(Applause as THOREAU takes his seat. BRONSON takes the podium.)

BRONSON:

Beautifully spoken, Mr. Thoreau! It’s with these ideals in mind that we are now ready for our announcement. I’d like to ask Mr. Charles Lane to step up to the podium. Mr. Lane and I met in England last year and immediately discovered we strive towards identical goals. He followed me back to the United States, determined to help our vision become a reality. Here he is, my dear, *dear* friend, Mr. Lane.

(CHARLES LANE approaches the podium as BRONSON returns to his seat. LANE speaks with the seductive charisma of an evangelist.)

LANE:

Once you’ve made a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen! Indeed, the universe is bringing our dream to fruition. We have made arrangements with a Mr. Wyman, proprietor of an estate of some ninety acres near here, which will liberate this tract from human ownership. Here we propose to initiate a Consociate Family in harmony with the primitive instincts of man. Here shall we grow vegetables, fruits and grains, affording ample manual occupation and chaste supplies for bodily needs. In order to adhere strictly to our principles, we must separate entirely from all local economies: no commerce, no trade, no ownership, no paid labor. Everything we eat will have been grown by our own hands. Complete self-sufficiency. No animals shall be abused for labor, nor exploited for their skins, their flesh, nor other substances: neither meat, butter, cheese, eggs, milk nor honey shall pollute our tables, nor corrupt our bodies. No leather or wool may be used—shoes and clothing must be made from whatever linen we can spin from flax. No tallow may be used for tapers. Every day we shall follow a strict regimen.

BRONSON:

Pardon, Mr. Lane, but let me reiterate that this experiment—this *Eden*, if you will—may be entered only through the gates of self-denial; but the inner nature of each member of our family shall be purified by this toil. If you believe that the traditions of local religious institutions feel distant, or critical, or unloving, you are not alone. This is your opportunity to build a new community of shared hope for a rewarding life. Now, who’ll subscribe to this quest to achieve a divine Utopia on Earth?

(PALMER, JONESY, ABRAHAM, LANE, BRONSON, and YOUNG LOUISA all raise their hands. ABBY pulls LOUISA's hand down.)

NANCY: *(rising)*

I have a question, Mr. Alcott.

BRONSON:

Yes, Mrs. Palmer?

NANCY:

Will it cost anything to join this "consociate family"?

LANE:

There is no cost. We only ask that you live at the farm and contribute your labor.

NANCY:

How is that possible? I mean, who bought, or, um, who paid for the, uh...

LANE:

The buyers wish to remain anonymous. Mr. Emerson holds the deed to the land as a trustee.

NANCY:

Mr. Emerson, very kind of you, sir. Do you intend to live there?

EMERSON:

Um, alas, I cannot. I have obligations that I cannot abandon. But I wish the enterprise much luck.

NANCY:

Do you think it will succeed?

EMERSON: *(unsure)*

I... have every reason to expect so.

(NANCY sits, still skeptical.)

PALMER: *(rising)*

These ninety acres... Is this already a farm, or is it just raw land?

LANE:

There is a farmhouse, and a barn. And apple trees.

PALMER:

How many apple trees?

LANE:

Ten.

PALMER:

That’s all?

BRONSON:

It’s a blank slate, Mr. Palmer—ready for us to design and plant the ideal farm of our dreams.

PALMER:

Well, forgive my bluntness, but I’m concerned that a farm that’s expected to feed a dozen people hasn’t been planted yet, and it’s already May. You gents ain’t farmers, so I don’t think you understand how much work lies ahead. I’m willin’ to join this venture because I believe in it. My wife Nancy and my hand Jonesy are comin’ too. I’m selling my farm in Leominster and I’ll bring my tools and seed and my two oxen.

LANE:

No oxen!

PALMER:

No oxen? How do you expect to plow raw land?

LANE:

With spades.

JONESY:

You expect four men to plow ninety acres with their bare hands?

ABRAHAM: (*rising*)

Five men!

PALMER:

Five men, thank you Mr. Wood.

ABRAHAM: (*sitting*)

Mr. *Abraham*, if you please, God damn it. (*He swears pleasantly, not angrily*)

LANE:

And the women, too, can help with the tilling.

ABBY:

Mr. Lane, I think you’ll find women less able to turn over soil with spades. Our backs are not as strong as men’s.

PALMER:

In my experience, the—

BRONSON:

Mr. Palmer, this venture is fortunate in the extremity to benefit from your expertise. I’m quite sure we couldn’t accomplish these goals without you. You may have doubts, but keep in mind that this is an *experiment*. In order for it to succeed, it requires *faith*. Faith in our convictions. Faith in our abilities.

PALMER:

I’d have a deal more faith in my oxen.

LANE:

Mr. Palmer, your stubbornness is well-known to us—your tremendous beard remains a shining example of it. But we must insist that no animals be exploited nor harmed in any way. If you wish to keep your oxen in the barn as pets, you are free to do so.

PALMER:

And my cow?

LANE:

And your cow.

JONESY:

Jus’ be careful where you throw ‘em sticks to fetch.

NANCY:

Joseph, I beg you, reconsider. This will make us a laughing-stock!

PALMER:

Like Mr. Alcott says, if you ain’t got faith in your convictions, what *do* you have? I’m fed up with the way our neighbors glare at us just because we won’t set foot in their sanctimonious house of eternal punishment.

JONESY:

I’m fed up too! The churches around here act like you have to buy your way into Heaven.

THOREAU:

Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.

EMERSON:

Precisely! And the greatest glory in living lies not in never failing, but in daring to achieve, boldly, and rising when we do fail.

THOREAU:

Isn't that from Confucius?

EMERSON:

I borrow from the best, my boy. —Let us all strive to rise up, together.

NANCY:

But nobody's asking the women for their opinions.

BRONSON:

We believe in human equality, Mrs. Palmer. This enterprise would most certainly fail without your courage and unique skills.

NANCY:

That's not the same thing. Don't you think we should discuss the practical details before we—

BRONSON:

There'll be plenty of time for that later. Once more, a show of hands?

(PALMER, JONESY, ABRAHAM, LANE, BRONSON, and YOUNG LOUISA all raise their hands again.)

ABBY:

Louy, you're not allowed to vote.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(standing on her bench)*

I have something to say!

BRONSON:

Yes, Louisa? What have you to say?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I'm going to write a book about this, and you're all going to be the cast of characters.

(There's a mixed response of laughter and outrage. She sits.)

BRONSON:

Gentlemen, and ladies, we will arrive at the farm on June the First. We look forward to seeing you there, for what I'm certain will be a grand, rewarding adventure. Remember that all enduring changes in society must originate within the individual and work their way outwards. Every day we shall strive to achieve Beauty, Virtue, Justice, & Love. And the name of our Garden of Eden shall be... FRUITLANDS!

(Sound of THUNDER cracking and RAIN. As the meeting breaks up, all exit with umbrellas, hats, shawls, etc.)

Act I, Scene 3: Fruitlands Farmhouse Common Room

(THUNDER and RAIN continue as LOUISA narrates from the lectern.)

LOUISA:

"It couldn't have been a muddier, more miserable journey, but the rain couldn't dampen our spirits. We had such high hopes, my three sisters and I... imagining we were going to a promised land where the sun always shines."

YOUNG LOUISA:

No, no, no! My sisters are NOT going to be in this story! They're just so boring! This is going to be a very exciting story about ME.

LOUISA:

Why must you insist on being the center of attention?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Isn't it obvious? Because I'm extremely interesting!

(YOUNG LOUISA goes to the lectern, crosses out a few lines, and exits. THUNDER again. LIGHTS come up on a dreary afternoon in a depressingly dilapidated Kitchen/Common Room. A fire burns in the hearth with a steaming cauldron hanging above the flames. Smoke escapes from large cracks in the broken chimney.)

(PALMER, NANCY and JONESY wait gloomily. JONESY sings "Bound to Go" from "Slave Songs of the United States" #30.)

JONESY:

I BUILD MY HOUSE UPON THE ROCK, HALLELUJAH
NO WIND, NO STORM CAN BLOW IT DOWN, HALLELUJAH

JONESY, PALMER, NANCY:

MARCH ON, BROTHER, BOUND TO GO
MARCH ON, SISTER, BOUND TO GO
MARCH ON, CHILDREN, BOUND TO GO
BROTHER, FARE YOU WELL.

(Another peal of THUNDER. The front door opens with a loud creak. Enter LANE, BRONSON, ABBY and YOUNG LOUISA, all looking miserable.)

BRONSON:

Oh blessed day!

NANCY:

Thank goodness you're here at last. *(She takes hot potatoes from the cauldron and puts them in a rough bowl.)*

ABBY:

And soaked to the bone. Louisa, go stand by the fire and warm yourself.

LANE: *(coughs)*

It's smoky in here.

PALMER:

Chimney's broken. So're the winda's. Roof leaks, too.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(brightening)*

Ooh, it's wonderfully creepy and forlorn! I wonder what strannge events befell the mysterious people who lived here before. I'm sure somebody was murdered.

LANE:

Alcott! Is that any way for a child to speak?

BRONSON:

I encourage Louisa to be imaginative. She likes telling stories.

LANE:

I suggest she imagine brighter, more productive tales, such as the annual return of the seasons; the wonder of seeds that grow into crops; and the rewards that hard work and plain living bring to the soul.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ugh, I'd rather slit my own throat. Kccchhhht! *(Pantomimes it gruesomely.)*

BRONSON:

Louisa, you must be polite to your elders.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(curtseying artificially)*

I'm sorry, Mr. Lane. —Please, may I go exploring?

ABBY:

Have something to eat first.

NANCY:

I boiled some potatoes. That's all we had handy.

BRONSON:

That's better than nothing, isn't it?

(NANCY distributes the hot potatoes. People hold them with kerchiefs or a corner of their coats, etc.)

ABBY: *(calling)*

Anna! Lizzie! Bring the baby, it's time for supper!

YOUNG LOUISA:

They went upstairs—I reckon they're not hungry. More for us, I suppose! Where should we sit?

PALMER:

Chairs'll be here tomorrow. Dishes too.

YOUNG LOUISA:

You mean we just stand here, and bite our potatoes, like savages?

ABBY:

Yes, Louisa.

(YOUNG LOUISA growls and bites her potato savagely.)

JONESY:

Do we have any salt?

LANE:

Do you suppose there's a salt mine on this farm? No! Salt was mined by the labor of the enslaved. We'll have none of it here!

JONESY:

But—

LANE:

We must be unwavering in our commitment to abstain from worldly things.

JONESY:

But food without salt is—

NANCY:

Jonesy, we'll grow some herbs to flavor our food.

LANE:

If you lack the integrity to comply with our strictures, Mr. Jones, you are always welcome to excuse yourself.

JONESY:

No no, Mr. Lane. I'm tough, believe me. If you can do it, I can do it.

YOUNG LOUISA:

This is fun! Like a picnic!

PALMER:

There ain't a day to lose. We must till the soil tomorrow, rain or shine.

NANCY:

Abby and I'll tidy up the house. (*Notices the floor.*) Ugh, what's that big stain?

ABBY:

Maybe there *was* a murder here.

NANCY:

It's so dark. I brought some candles.

LANE:

Are they vegetable oil tapers?

NANCY:

No, they're... tallow.

LANE:

Then throw them away. We'll burn no animal fat in this house.

ABBY:

So are we to sit in the dark?

BRONSON:

Abby, my dear, this new way of life will take some getting used to. We will make hay while the sun shines, sleep when it sets, and burn wood in the winter evenings. Mr. Lane has arranged a very sensible plan for us to follow.

LANE:

We shall arise at dawn each day, and begin by bathing in cold water. Then a chaste breakfast of fruit and bread. We'll work till midday, when we'll rest from our healthful labor with deep-searching conversation. In the evenings, after a repast of bread and vegetables, we'll assemble in social communion until sunset, when we retire to sweet repose.

NANCY & ABBY: (*smirking*)

God willing! (*They giggle.*)

LANE:

Mrs. Alcott, Mrs. Palmer, do not mock us. You may not believe in the philosophies to which we aspire, but while you live in this house, you must be positive and supportive, lest any disdain bring about discord.

ABBY:

Of course.

BRONSON:

Remember, we are one big family now. We are all brothers and sisters. I suggest we use our Christian names to promote our new familial bond. Brother Charles, Brother Joseph, Sister Nancy, Brother...? (*Looks at JONESY.*)

JONESY:

“Hiram.” No sir, I think “Jonesy” is better. “Brother Jonesy” will do jus’ fine.

LANE:

This will take some getting used to. We rarely use such familiarity in England.

ABBY:

Well, Brother Charlie, it seems we all have a great deal to get used to.

(THUNDER cracks. A menacing figure appears suddenly in the doorway. Everyone starts; some scream. The monster takes a step into the room and reveals itself to be WOOD ABRAHAM.)

BRONSON: (*somewhat relieved*)

Ah, Brother Abraham!

ABRAHAM:

The name’s Wood! God damn it!

(ALL react—ABBY cups her hands over YOUNG LOUISA’s ears. The tableau freezes. BLACKOUT.)

Act I, Scene 4: Same, a few days later. Day

(The storm transitions to summery birdsong and the buzz of insects. Sunny LIGHTS up on the Common Room. There is now a rudimentary table and four benches around it. ABBY wipes the table with a rag as LOUISA continues to write at the lectern.)

LOUISA:

“Having cast the forms and vanities of a depraved world behind them, the elders welcomed hardship with the enthusiasm of new pioneers, and the children heartily enjoyed this foretaste of what they believed was to be a sort of perpetual field-day.”

(PALMER and JONESY enter, filthy and bent with exhaustion. They sit.)

PALMER:

Is it noon yet?

ABBY:

Very nearly. How goes the tilling?

JONESY:

Very slow. Very hard. I think I heard the oxen in the barn, laughing at us.

PALMER: *(observing his hands)*

I've never had such blisters!

ABBY:

I'll find some cloth you can wrap them with.

(LANE enters from the hall at the back of the room.)

LANE:

Ah, Brother Joseph, Brother Jonesy. Time for our midday sustenance!

JONESY:

We could've used your help in the meadow today, Brother Charles. Plenty of spades.

LANE:

Ah, I was writing letters to Mr. Emerson and Mr. Thoreau about what a success our endeavor is thus far. It's vital to keep them abreast of our forward progress.

PALMER:

Won't be no forward progress 'less'n you grab a spade. I'm serious, we need every man!

LANE:

Tomorrow.

JONESY:

Brother Charles, I'm hopin' you won't mind if I collect the manure from the oxen and the cow, to fertilize that barren soil.

LANE:

Don't you dare! No animal products are to be used—none whatsoever.

PALMER:

But that don't make sense. The critters ain't bein' harmed, or harnessed, or worked. The manure just—well—it just comes out of 'em, naturally.

LANE:

No matter!

PALMER:

But that land needs to be nourished! Without manure, nothing will grow in it!

JONESY:

When we muck out the barn, what you want us to do with the manure? We have to put it somewheres. Might as well be in the field.

LANE:

That soil is sacred. What grows from the seeds we sow will feed us. Do you really want your food to be desecrated by the profane feces of animals?

PALMER & JONESY:

Yes.

(NANCY enters holding up the corners of her apron skirt. It's filled with a thick green weed she's collected. She dumps it onto the table.)

NANCY:

Look what I found: purslane! Lots of it. Quite wholesome, and not at all bitter.

(They ALL taste it. It's chewy but at least it doesn't taste bad. As everyone enters, they each sit and eat some purslane.)

Was Brother Wood helping in the meadow?

PALMER:

Yes. He works very hard.

JONESY:

But lordy, that man sure know how to curse. Seems like every other thing he say is some kind of oath.

ABBY:

We must get him to stop.

JONESY:

I don't think you can. He said somethin' about the Lord prefer him to swear. Says it keeps him honest.

ABBY:

Nonsense. I don't want Louisa May hearing that coarse language.

(BRONSON and YOUNG LOUISA enter. YOUNG LOUISA carries her big journal.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

What coarse language?

ABBY:

All those queer things Brother Wood shouts all the time. You mustn't pay them any mind.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I think he's funny. Look, Marmee: Mr. Thoreau gave me a new Imagination Book to write in. But I'm not allowed to include any ghosts or murderers.

ABBY:

What have you written so far? *(YOUNG LOUISA hands ABBY her book; ABBY reads quietly.)* “As the rats swarmed into the house, the farmers and their wives...”

YOUNG LOUISA: *(grabs her book)*

Not like *that!* With gusto, like *this!* *(Melodramatically)* “As the rats swarmed into the house, the farmers and their wives *screeeeamed in terror*. Bang!—went the door as Louis stepped boldly into the room, club in hand, swinging it wildly from side to side —“ What do you think? It really needs ghosts and murderers.

ABBY:

It filled me with dread.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Oh. That's a compliment, right?

ABBY:

Now go tell your sisters to come downstairs and eat something.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(grumbles, then bellows)*

ANNA! LIZZIE! MAY! COME DOWN AND EAT SOME WEEDS!

LANE:

Is all that screaming really necessary?

YOUNG LOUISA:

If you want them to hear me, yes! Do we have any parchment?

ABBY:

Whatever for?

YOUNG LOUISA:

A prop for a play I’m writing. I need it to look important.

ABBY: (*hands her a dirty rag*)

Here you are, your highness.

PALMER:

We could have used you in the meadow, Brother Bronson.

BRONSON:

Ah, but Louisa’s education comes first. This farm is such a perfect opportunity to teach her about the world around us. Every blade of grass* tells a story—

PALMER: (**interrupting*)

If we don’t get that field tilled, it’ll be too late to put seeds in the ground!

BRONSON:

What about Brother Wood? Isn’t he helping?

PALMER:

We need *every* pair of hands!

NANCY:

Where *is* Brother Wood?

JONESY:

He stopped at the pump to wash.

NANCY:

Well he’d better come soon or I’ll have to pick some more—*OH!*

(NANCY is startled by ABRAHAM, who enters wearing nothing but a little loincloth—or some drawers. Everyone is startled by his lack of clothing.)

LANE:

Good lord, man! Put some clothes on!

ABRAHAM:

What, there’s some sort o’ rule about havin’ to wear clothes?

BRONSON:

Er... no, but you can’t be running around all... indecent.

ABRAHAM:

What’s indecent about it? This is how God made me. Nothin’ to be ashamed of. You tellin’ me the Transcontinentalists gonna force me to wear goll-darned clothes if I don’t wanna? *(Crows and struts around in a circle, flapping his elbows like a rooster.)*

(EVERYONE pauses and looks at everyone else. No one can think of a rebuttal. After a few seconds, NANCY breaks the silence.)

NANCY:

Have some purslane. It’s not bad.

(ABRAHAM sits at the table with everyone else and pops some purslane into his mouth. Everyone sits and chews quietly, methodically, like cows chewing their cuds. After about five seconds, ABRAHAM breaks the silence.)

ABRAHAM:

Is there more o’ this?

NANCY:

It’s a weed. There’s acres of it.

ABRAHAM:

Well, damn me to blazes.

LANE:

Brother Bronson, may I speak with you, privately?

BRONSON:

Indeed, just a moment...

(They chew... and chew... and sigh...)

YOUNG LOUISA: *(imitating a cow)*

Mooooo...!

(Some think this is rude, others stifle a chortle... BLACKOUT.)

Act I, Scene 5: Farmhouse Attic, immediately following

(BRONSON and LANE meet in a dimly lit space. YOUNG LOUISA goes to the lectern and dictates to LOUISA, who writes.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

I learned a new word: “eavesdropping.” You’d think it would mean “to fall off the roof.” No. It means to listen to something in secret. It’s not good manners. At all. Not *at all*. (*She remains onstage, eavesdropping.*)

LANE:

Somehow I imagined we’d have more... *normal* farmers. I don’t know how to *begin* to discipline this extraordinary group of...

BRONSON:

Of what?

LANE:

It’s not what I expected. I’d hoped Mr. Emerson and Mr. Thoreau, and *others* would be here with us. I’d hoped they’d have given us more support. I’d hoped a great deal of things.

BRONSON:

Brother Charles, this is our utopian dream come to life! You said yourself, “This enterprise *must* be rooted in the reliance on an *ever-bounteous Providence*, by whose *vital affinities*, secured by *uncorrupted fields* and *unworldly persons*, the cares and injuries of a life of *GAIN* are avoided!”

LANE:

You’re quoting *yourself*, I think.

BRONSON:

There are times when we must simply trust God to provide. Do you believe that this venture *can and will* succeed? *Do you believe*, Brother Charles?

LANE: (*agonizing*)

But—Children! Madmen! Atheists! An African slave!

BRONSON:

We are all brothers and sisters in the eyes of the Lord. It’s your job to keep us all on the straight and narrow path—*ALL of us*—and with an open heart. Will you do it?

LANE: (*with difficulty*)

Yes. I will. I can. I—I *believe*.

(*BLACKOUT.*)

Act I, Scene 6: The Common Room. Weeks later. Day.

(*NANCY sits, in a dark mood, sharpening a knife with a stone. LOUISA narrates from lectern.*)

LOUISA:

"Slowly things got into order. The three farmers found when half-through that each had been sowing a different grain in the same field; but it was decided to say nothing and see what would come of it. Rapidly rumors of our experiment proliferated, causing many curious neighbors to knock hither; for in those days, spiritual communities were the fashion. Throughout the towns, our reputation raged wildly."

(ABBY enters and sits. NANCY gets frustrated and slams the tools onto the table.)

ABBY:

Oh Nancy, I'm so sorry.

NANCY:

What for?

ABBY:

Bronson's never worked a farm before. Louisa's uncontrollable. That rock isn't a proper whetstone. Gawkers come to peek in at our door almost every day. Should I continue the list?

NANCY:

I'm not upset with *you*. I'm angry at those darned philosophers. They've got my Joseph under a spell. I understand why he wanted to join them; I just wish they'd listened to some common sense beforehand.

ABBY:

Oh, it's not like we're going to starve. *(NANCY gives a look.)* Are we?

NANCY:

We're living on bread and weeds. How long do you think that flour will last us?

ABBY:

I don't know. Honestly, it's so strange not being able to go to a market. I'd assumed the farm would provide... No?

NANCY:

Well... The men got us into this mess, and if they have to, they'll get us out of it. Not much we can do besides do our best.

(ABBY pulls a tiny flask from her apron pocket.)

ABBY:

Here, pass down those two cups.

NANCY:

What’s that?

ABBY:

Oh, just a drop of brandy I’d put aside. Just enough for two. *(Pours)*

NANCY:

Oh, Abby, really?

ABBY:

Can’t think of a reason to keep it. There, this’ll lift our spirits.

(Enter LANE from the hall.)

NANCY & ABBY: *(clinking the cups)*

Cheers!

LANE:

What outrage is this?

ABBY:

Just a drop of brandy, Brother Charles. Surely you won’t begrudge us? I don’t remember you specifically forbidding spirits.

LANE:

I suppose you’ve distilled it yourself? No? Pour it out. Pour it onto the floor. It shall not touch your lips!

(ABBY and NANCY are furious—but after a moment’s difficult consideration, they pour the measly amounts of liquid out of the cups and onto the floor.)

This is the last time such a breach of discipline will be tolerated.

(He exits out the front door.)

NANCY:

Do you think he’ll tell our husbands?

ABBY:

Let him. If we’re lucky, they’ll kick us out.

NANCY:

Haha!

ABBY:

If I get any hungrier, I might make a stew out of Charles Lane.

NANCY:

Ugh!

ABBY:

I hope that won't break any of his precious rules?

NANCY:

I don't think so. He's here at the farm, and the farm shall provide.

ABBY:

The farm shall provide!

(Laughing, they clink their empty glasses together and pretend to drink from them.)

NANCY:

I'll bet he tastes *terrible!*

(Their laughter grows as the Lights BLACKOUT.)

Act I, Scene 7: A Field. Weeks later. Day.

(PALMER, JONESY, and YOUNG LOUISA, wearing straw hats, are tending the soil with hoes and rakes. JONESY sings “When We Do Meet Again” #53.)

JONESY:

WHEN WE DO MEET AGAIN
WHEN WE DO MEET AGAIN
WHEN WE DO MEET AGAIN
'T WILL BE NO MORE TO PART.

ALL: *(singing)*

BROTHER JOSEPH, FARE YOU WELL
SISTER MARY, FARE YOU WELL
WE'LL SING HALLELUJAH
WHEN WE DO MEET AGAIN.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Jonesy, do you believe departed souls go to heaven, or turn into ghosts... Or do our particles become flowers and apple trees?

JONESY:

Don't rightly know.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Then why do you sing about us meeting again after we die?

JONESY:

When we're missin' those who've left us, we sing to ease the pain. Gives us hope to think we might see 'em again someday, even if we's jus' pretendin'. I sing them songs 'cause my mama taught 'em to me, and they help me feel close to her.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Where is she? (*JONESY shrugs.*) How do you and Brother Joseph come to know each other?

JONESY:

We met when we was both in jail.

YOUNG LOUISA:

In jail? Why were you in jail?

JONESY:

That's not a story for li'l folks. You're too young.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I am not!

JONESY:

If we told you, you would scream.

YOUNG LOUISA:

(*Gasp!*) I LIKE stories that make me scream.

PALMER:

We'll tell you when you're older.

YOUNG LOUISA:

If you tell me, it'll make your character in my book more exciting.

PALMER:

I'm in your book?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I put everyone in my book. But don't worry, I don't use your real names. I call you Moses. Because of your beard. And because you're wise.

JONESY:

Are you gonna be a writer when you're all grow'd up?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I'd rather be a duchess.

PALMER:

What's a duchess?

YOUNG LOUISA:

A duchess gets to live in a beautiful house in Europe, and be surrounded by lovely ladies-in-waiting, and have adventures on horses and boats... but she doesn't have any responsibility. She doesn't have to rule a kingdom. And everybody likes her.

PALMER:

Sounds like she's spoiled rotten.

JONESY:

Completely useless!

PALMER:

You shouldn't be so selfish when you think about your future. You should try instead to make things better. Take my example: prisoners in jails used to be very badly treated. But not any more.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Why? What happened?

PALMER: *(after a beat)*

No, I ain't gonna waste this story on a selfish little girl who ain't serious 'bout bein' grown up.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I do take it serious. Cross my heart!

PALMER:

Hmph! That's a feeble sort o' promise.

YOUNG LOUISA:

How else can I promise?

JONESY:

By your deeds. By how you behave every day.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Very well. I promise to be serious in deed, every day.

(She spits in her hand and extends it. PALMER and JONESY smile, then take turns shaking it solemnly.)

PALMER:

About fourteen years ago, I was set upon by some men that wanted to cut off my beard.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Why?

PALMER:

Beards ain't popular nowadays, and a preacher in Fitchburg yelled at me right in church. Called me a dirty blasphemer in front of the whole congregation, just because I wore a beard like our Lord Jesus Christ.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Why would he do that?

PALMER:

I can't explain it. But them four men attacked me. They had scissors and a razor, and they told me they was gonna do me a favor.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(wide-eyed)*

What did you do?

PALMER:

I took out my knife. I told 'em to stay back, but they held me down. So I started cuttin' at their legs. That made 'em stop, but the Sheriff arrested me. I told the Judge I was defendin' myself from bein' set-on by that gang, but he said I was crazy for wearing a beard, and put me in jail for committin' an unprovoked assault.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Christ almighty!

PALMER:

Louisa! Never take the Lord's name in vain like that.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I'm sorry. Brother Wood says it so often, I suppose I got used to it.

JONESY:

Next time you get the urge, say something more polite, like... "Christopher Columbus."

YOUNG LOUISA:

I’ll try. It must have been awful in jail. I’ve read about dungeons in books. Dark, cold and damp, with rats chewing on you while you sleep.

PALMER:

It’s all them things. And a jailer who beat me and starved me near to death.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Didn’t you get a trial?

PALMER:

The Judge suspended my sentence, I s’pose ‘cause I’m a good, decent man. But there was fifty dollars due in fines and such, and I told the judge I wouldn’t pay it.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Because you were innocent! How did you get out?

PALMER:

When Nancy come to visit, she brought pen and ink, and paper. In secret I wrote letters tellin’ about the awful conditions. She took my letters to the newspapers. When they was published, people started talkin’ about me, and seein’ that my incarceration was a terrible breach of justice. That ol’ judge finally waived the fines and let me out, after more than a year.

YOUNG LOUISA:

You were *in-car-cer-ation* for a whole year?

PALMER:

Yep. People didn’t know how badly prisoners were treated. My letters woke everybody up, and conditions improved.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*to Jonesy*)

But why were *you* there?

JONESY:

You know how I likes to sing?

YOUNG LOUISA:

That’s not against the law, is it?

JONESY:

No. But one night I was singin’ them old songs my mama taught me. Didn’t realize I was singin’ so loud—just kinda got lost in them memories. Wandered into town, singin’ like I was fit to bust. Somebody called for the sheriff cuz I was disturbing’ the peace. Wasn’t a free-man then so they was gonna send me back to Virginny, to that evil plantation I run away from. And that’s when I met Mister Joe Palmer in the county jail. Brother Joseph told Sister Nancy, straight off, “We got to help Jonesy get

his freedom.” Nancy wrote to her cousin in Virginny, and he went to see my old master. Ten years gone by, so he didn’t even ‘member me. Sold my freedom to Nancy’s cousin for a hundred and fifty dollars.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Wowee! Did you have to pay ‘em back?

JONESY:

They wouldn’t let me. Just wanted me to be one of the family. Never met such gen’rous, kindly folks.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Is that because they’re Transcendentalists?

PALMER:

Louy, I ain’t no philosopher, but I hate those churches for their hypocritical meddling. That’s why I like Mr. Emerson’s story about Nature—about how folks can know God directly, and shouldn’t let crazy preachers poison their minds with a lot of mean talk. Folks shouldn’t act superior, or be afraid of each other.

JONESY:

If we gonna believe in somethin’, we should believe in *good folks*. All we got is the goodness in each other to help us through our troubles.

PALMER:

And we need to act, to *do things*, and not just talk about ‘em. So, you still wanna be a duchess, or do you wanna make the world a better place?

(PALMER and JONESY exit as YOUNG LOUISA steps Downstage.)

YOUNG LOUISA: *(aside)*

I think I’d rather be a duchess. Honestly. Making the world a better place sounds like an awful lot of trouble. I know, I promised to be serious. *(She dictates to LOUISA.)* “How to be a serious grown-up. First: grow a long beard.” I suppose that’s not very practical. I think I have a false one in my toy-box.

(Enter LANE.)

Hello Brother Charles. Did you finally decide to help with the weeding?

LANE:

No, Louisa, I wanted to speak with you. Are you alone?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Yes. *(LANE sniffs unpleasantly at the stinking ground.)* What are you doing?

LANE:

I need to speak with Palmer about the soil. Miss Alcott, I—

YOUNG LOUISA:

“Sister Louisa.”

LANE: (*bristling*)

Sister Louisa, I’m concerned that your father’s alternative form of education is... misguided.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I thought you liked my father’s ideas.

LANE:

My estimation is evolving. Starting today I shall be providing you with formalized lessons.

YOUNG LOUISA:

No!

LANE:

I beg your pardon!

YOUNG LOUISA:

What’s wrong with my education? I’m learning about farming, and nature, and baking bread, and sewing, and even singing from Brother Jonesy.

LANE:

From now on, you’ll be taking your lessons from me, and only me. You shall learn your English grammar and your times-tables.

YOUNG LOUISA:

But Brother Jonesy says I—

LANE:

I especially do not want you speaking with Jonesy!

YOUNG LOUISA:

Why not?

LANE:

Children should not interact with Negro men. It’s unseemly and potentially dangerous.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Dangerous? I thought Jonesy was my friend. What’s wrong with him?

LANE:

Sister Louisa, Jonesy is of African descent. It is an established fact that they are a lower form of creature. That is why we consider them property.

YOUNG LOUISA:

But he’s not property. He’s free. That’s what abolitionists are fighting for.

LANE:

Don’t listen to those cursed abolitionists! They’re rending the very fabric of our society. You must believe me, Louisa. If Negroes are set free, our world will descend into chaos. Is that what you want? Chaos in the streets?

YOUNG LOUISA: (*struggling*)

I—I suppose not.

LANE:

Very sensible. Come, let’s return to the house. Come!

(LANE extends his hand. YOUNG LOUISA reluctantly takes it, and they exit. LIGHTS transition to...)

Act I, Scene 8: Inside the Barn. Evening

(Sound of a COW lowing. By lantern light, ABRAHAM, mostly naked as usual, is shoveling manure aside. JONESY enters with a shallow wooden bowl full of milk.)

JONESY:

Here, Brother Wood, drink some.

ABRAHAM: (*drinks*)

Tarnation, that’s tasty.

JONESY:

Can’t help feeling a li’l guilty. (*Drinks.*)

ABRAHAM:

Hell’s bells! You’re doin’ that poor cow a favor. You relieve her fullness. Then what you gonna do with the milk? Throw it on the ground and let it stink? Drinkin’ it just keeps the place clean, dad-blame-it!

JONESY:

So you don’t feel like a sinner, breakin’ Mr. Lane’s rules?

ABRAHAM:

I don't give a tinker's cuss for Charles Lane. They can't tend this farm without us. They talks about folks havin' an individualistic relationship with God. Welp, God tells me what to do, an' not no one else.

JONESY:

You truly hear God's voice in your ears?

ABRAHAM:

Loud and clear. Course, that's why they put me in the Asylum. If I'd've been Joan of Arc, they'd've made me a blasted saint. Nowadays if'n you hear God's voice, they lock you up, them cur-sed blaggards.

JONESY:

Who done locked you up?

ABRAHAM:

'Twas my own mammy and pappy. "He's brought shame to our good family," they said. Just because God told me to rejoice in nakedness and curse a blue streak. Well, shame on them, the blasted hypocrites. They can rot in Hell.

JONESY:

So you enjoy bein' here?

ABRAHAM:

Where else am I to go? Bless them Transperdentalists! Nobody else'll keep me around.

JONESY:

What'll you do if the family breaks up?

ABRAHAM:

You think it might?

JONESY:

Look at this place. Nothin' growin' in that field. Brother Joseph done everything he could, but lordy, Alcott and Lane are worse than useless! Spoutin' philosophy and arguing' all day instead of workin' the farm? Only so much we can do. What'll happen when winter comes and there ain't naught to eat?

ABRAHAM:

What'll happen?

JONESY:

Damned if I know. Hey! You got me swearin' now, you devil.

ABRAHAM:

Feels good, don't it!

JONESY:

Next thing you know I'll be shuckin' my clothes and runnin' 'round naked as a jaybird.

ABRAHAM:

You should! Nothin' feels closer to Nature than shuckin' off them damn clothes.

JONESY:

I think I will! *(Pulls off his shirt.)*

ABRAHAM:

Don't it feel good?

(JONESY jumps around joyfully. ABRAHAM joins him; they dance around and whoop.)

JONESY:

Ha! Didn't think it'd feel so good! It's like going back to olden times! Before slavery—before folks started actin' all superior t'each other—before there was so many damn rules! When you could just run around and do as you please!

(They jump around again. Then they come together face-to-face and grapple in an aggressive hug. Then they relax and look at each other.)

ABRAHAM:

I ain't never had a real friend before. Dammit.

(They embrace as the LIGHTS crossfade to:)

Act I, Scene 9: Fruitlands Farmhouse Common Room. Day.

(The dining table has been pushed Upstage and the benches arranged in two rows. YOUNG LOUISA stands on the table, holding her open book, ready to address her “audience.” BRONSON, ABBY, LANE, JONESY, PALMER, NANCY, and ABRAHAM take their seats facing LOUISA. Some hold horn-books, ie. wooden paddles with scripts tacked to one side.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Please be seated, 'tis nigh the 'pointed hour.

ABRAHAM: *(to JONESY)*

I don't understand. What sort of show is this?

JONESY:

Some sort of recital, I suppose.

ABBY:

Where are your sisters?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I told them there were fairies in the barn and not to come back till they've caught one. I don't want them distracting me. (*Ahem!*). Hear ye, hear ye! Today I shall prove that I have learned something, or else be flunked to repeat my lessons over again. Alas, two members of our school board have failed to turn up, so we shall begin without them. Today's program is entitled: "A Day at Fruitlands." We begin—

(The door opens suddenly, and EMERSON and THOREAU enter.)

THOREAU:

So sorry to be late!

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ah, Mr. Emerson, Mr. Thoreau! Your timing is un-peckable!

BRONSON:

That's "IMpeccable," my dear.

EMERSON:

We wouldn't have missed this for the world.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Here are your hornbooks.

THOREAU:

What are these for?

YOUNG LOUISA:

All shall be revealed in due time. Please be seated. *Ahem!* Today's program is entitled: "A Day at Fruitlands." We begin at sunrise! No cock-a-doodle-doo starts our day; we would not dare force a rooster to crow, as that would unfairly deprive him of his right to remain asleep. Instead, the dawn is greeted by Louisa May Alcott, taking her usual morning run around the farm. As the sun peeks above the horizon, she pauses to inhale the morning mist. The first rays of sunshine awaken the dewy fields and trees. It's at moments like these that one can feel the presence of God in every living thing.

(EMERSON rises to read his lines.)

EMERSON: *(as God)*

Gooooood mooorning Looouisa!

YOUNG LOUISA:

Good morning, God! I feel your presence in every particle of my being! Bless our consociate family and our farm and everything in it. Amen.

EMERSON: *(as God)*

It would be my pleasure, as long as you promise to work hard and obey your elders. Awaken, Spirits of Nature!

(YOUNG LOUISA points to THOREAU, who takes his flute from his pocket and plays a sweet melody.)

Awaken, forest creatures, trees, and flowers! Awaken seeds, sleeping snugly beneath the muddy ground. Today shall you stretch and grow and reach for the heavens in your quest to become grains and vegetables to sustain the consociate family!

NANCY & ABBY: *(rising, as “seeds”)*

We’ll grow larger every hour,
Making grain to grind to flour,
Thank you, God, for all your power,
Making food that folks devour.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Speak, Spirit of Nature!

THOREAU: *(rising, reads)*

Neighbors, leave your neighborhoods!
Come with us, live in the woods!
Cast aside Society’s noise
Before your soul it quite destroys.
Join the foxes and the deer
And the trees that blossom here!
Bounteous Nature shall provide!
Life becomes more simplified.
Pray like an Indian Yo-GI
For balance and for harmony.
Then if thou wouldst be truly free,
Come, live in the woods with me.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(to THOREAU)*

How was that?

THOREAU: *(quietly)*

Your scansion needs work; we’ll talk about it later.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*reading again*)

Thank you Seeds, and God, and Spirit of Nature—you can sit back down.

(They sit. THOREAU concludes his flute song.)

Returning to the house, Louisa bathes herself in refreshingly cold water.

(She splashes water on her face from a small mug. This gets a chuckle from her audience.)

For breakfast, Louisa—

LANE: (*rises, interrupting*)

Sister Louisa, list all the ways that the *ideals* of the Fruitlands community have improved you.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Please just read what’s in the script...

LANE:

Nonsense. This silly recital is a waste of time. Reading poems from a book doesn’t prove that you’ve learned anything. If this were a proper test of your knowledge, you’d have no book to read from; and if you failed to answer a question correctly, you’d be punished.

BRONSON:

Brother Charles, I don’t see any value in punishing the child. I won’t use negative reinforcement. I won’t have her made miserable for the rest of her life if she can’t remember what year the *Magna Carta* was signed.

LANE:

Louisa, what year was the Magna Carta signed?

(YOUNG LOUISA begins to cry.)

BRONSON:

There, you see?

LANE:

Brother Bronson, the child is playing a manipulative game. Crying is an excuse to avoid learning her lessons. And you succumb to her cleverness because your love for the child is a weakness for her to exploit.

YOUNG LOUISA:

You’re ruining it!

PALMER: (*to LANE*)

You’re a bold one to talk about manipulation—always findin’ excuses to avoid workin’ the field, Mr. I-Won’t-Get-My-Hands-Dirty.

JONESY & ABRAHAM:

Hear hear!

EMERSON: (*rising*)

Personally, I approve of Louy reading poems from her book. She’s a highly original thinker and her writing skill should be encouraged.

THOREAU: (*rising*)

I agree. She could write entire plays that express the essence of Transcendental metaphors.

LANE:

But she can’t do basic arithmetic! And her silly play is deeply disrespectful.

JONESY:

As her music teacher, I can say Louisa is a perfect student with a good voice.

LANE:

But what’s the point of her learning those old slave songs?

(On the edge of quarreling, EVERYONE starts to react vocally.)

JONESY:

What’s the matter with you, Brother Charles? Don’t you like my singing voice? Or is it ‘cuz you don’t like having a Negro man in the house? In your *family*?

NANCY:

Is that true, Brother Charles?

LANE:

I admit, I am having difficulty getting used to the idea. I’m afraid I have... conflicting notions.

ABBY:

Well, *we’re* all forcing ourselves into lives of self-denial. Perhaps you could sacrifice your “conflicting notions” so we can all live peaceably together—?

LANE: (*interrupting*)

And I won’t be dictated to by atheist females!

(Everyone loses their self-control. They rise angrily and shout at LANE. But the yelling is finally overwhelmed by YOUNG LOUISA, who bellows a sustained, frustrated scream, which draws everyone's attention.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Why must there be so much arguing! I thought this farm was supposed to produce harmony and love and hope! I hate everybody in this room!

EMERSON:

Now Louy, you know you don't mean that. You should never speak an untruth in a fit of passion. Collect your thoughts. Express yourself meaningfully.

(YOUNG LOUISA ponders this for a moment, then bursts into tears. Crying, she exits down the hall.)

Not the thoughtful reply I was hoping for.

THOREAU:

I'll go. *(He exits to comfort YOUNG LOUISA.)*

BRONSON:

Mr. Lane, kindly keep your opinions to yourself from now on.

LANE:

I've never been so abused in all my life.

EMERSON:

Welcome to America! Mr. Palmer, I hope the farm is faring better than the school here at Fruitlands?

PALMER:

Wish I could say so, Mr. Emerson, but that just ain't the case.

BRONSON:

But it's early yet! Only August! We hope to see the fruits of our labors very soon.

EMERSON:

Bronson, may your fountain of Hope never run dry.

(A loud, aggressive knock on the door. PALMER goes to answer it.)

ABBY:

If it's tourists, tell them to come poke fun at us some other day.

(PALMER opens the door: a SHERIFF is there.)

PALMER:

Sheriff! What’s the matter?

SHERIFF:

We heard you might be harboring escaped slaves here. I have to take ‘em into custody if they don’t have papers.

PALMER:

The only black man here is Hiram Jones, but you know him. Been free for thirteen years. He’s a *bona fide* member of our family.

SHERIFF:

Lots of folks in town have concerns ‘bout this place. We have to verify you folks is followin’ the law. If he’s a free man, I need to see his papers.

EMERSON:

Jonesy, our Sheriff seems to have forgotten who you are!

JONESY:

Thirteen years is a mighty long time. Nobody ever asked before. I don’t rightly know where my papers are.

SHERIFF:

Then you’ll have to come with me.

ABRAHAM:

Like hellfire he will! (*Points a finger at LANE*) This is all HIS fault.

BRONSON:

Brother Charles, is this *your* doing?

(LANE shakes his head but says nothing. ALL stare helplessly as JONESY approaches the SHERIFF. YOUNG LOUISA re-enters.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

What’s going on?

BRONSON:

The Sheriff seems to think he can arrest Brother Jonesy.

YOUNG LOUISA:

No, Jonesy! Don’t go with him!

JONESY:

It’s a mistake. I’ll talk to the judge. Judge Brigham’ll remember me.

SHERIFF:

Ol' Brigham's retired. Got us a new judge now.

YOUNG LOUISA:

You can't arrest him! He's free!

ABBY: *(restraining YOUNG LOUISA)*

Louy, behave!

(The SHERIFF leads JONESY out the door.)

ABRAHAM:

You can't take my friend! Stop him!

(The MEN near ABRAHAM restrain him. ABRAHAM struggles.)

JONESY:

Don't fret now, I'll clear this up in no time. Louy, mind your folks. Don't worry, Brother Wood, I'll be back soon, I promise.

(The door closes behind them. ABRAHAM shudders and starts to quietly sob.)

ABBY:

Mr. Lane, that was a cruel, inhuman thing to do.

LANE:

On my oath, I had nothing to do with this.

YOUNG LOUISA:

What's the matter with Brother Wood?

ABRAHAM:

How could you just let him go? What if he never comes back? Shame on you! All of you! Shame! *(He cries.)*

(The scene freezes as the LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK. CURTAIN.)

--INTERMISSION--

Act II, Scene 1: A Forest, Alongside a Pond. Day.

(THOREAU is seated, eyes closed, legs folded beneath him. He plays a tune on his flute, but pauses to cough a little. LOUISA enters and takes her usual position at the lectern.)

LOUISA: *(aside)*

"My sweet, curious friend Mr. Thoreau had a weakness in his lungs that would end his brilliant life all too soon. I shall always remember him as the maker of pencils and someone who could summon all the spirits of the forest with his flute."

(EMERSON and YOUNG LOUISA enter holding hands.)

EMERSON:

You have a visitor.

THOREAU: *(eyes still closed)*

Stop! Don't tell me. I can decipher by the crunching of the forest floor underfoot... A wise philosopher and a badly-behaved child. *(Opens his eyes.)* Besides, I could hear you a mile away. *(Rises.)* Have some tea? I make it with willow-bark.

(Sobbing, YOUNG LOUISA runs to THOREAU and hugs him.)

There there, child! Have you run out of pencils? I can supply you with more.

EMERSON:

It seems that Charles Lane has become something of a tyrant at Fruitlands. And Hiram Jones is still behind bars, until someone can prove he's a free man.

THOREAU:

But why do you come to us?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I thought you were in charge. I hoped you could come and tell everybody what they should do.

EMERSON:

Good heavens, no, Louy! As a Trustee I agreed not to interfere with the operations of Fruitlands in any way.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I don't understand.

THOREAU:

That means that changes at Fruitlands, just like in one's soul, must come from WITHIN.

EMERSON:

For example, you, Louisa, could explain to the consociate family exactly how you think you should be educated.

YOUNG LOUISA:

They won't listen to me. I'm too young.

EMERSON:

I'll tell you a little secret, Louy. Grown-ups aren't all as smart as we pretend to be. Adults can be just as mad, and ridiculous, and ignorant as children.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ah, I knew it! That explains so much. But isn't there anything we can do to help Jonesy?

THOREAU:

You could hire a lawyer.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I was thinking... *dynamite*.

THOREAU:

Louy! Your life is not an adventure story!

EMERSON:

My darling girl, I know you're only ten years old, but if you want to help other people, you have stop thinking like a child. Part of your education is to understand WHY life is the way it is, so that you can IMAGINE ways to improve it. It's a different kind of thinking. It requires compassion.

YOUNG LOUISA:

What's compassion?

THOREAU:

That's the ability to see life from the perspective of others.

EMERSON:

You have to think of others' needs before your own.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I keep picturing Jonesy in that awful dungeon, cold, and hungry, and lonely... if only we knew where to find his free-man papers. I'd do anything if I could... if I could... *(She realizes!)* Oh! OH! The papers! *The papers!!* I have to get home right away! Goodbye!

(YOUNG LOUISA exits at a run.)

EMERSON:

Lord that girl can run. *(THOREAU coughs a little.)* A bad day, I presume?

THOREAU:

Every day I can feel the forest beneath my feet is a good day. Even with this phantom living in my lungs.

EMERSON:

Don't tell Louisa. She'll want to write a ghost story about it.

(EMERSON reaches out his hand, and THOREAU takes it warmly. They exit as LIGHTS change...)

Act II, Scene 2: A Jail Cell

(Harsh lighting illuminates JONESY alone behind iron bars.)

JONESY: *(sings “Oh Freedom”)*

OH, FREEDOM, OH, FREEDOM
OH FREEDOM OVER ME
AND BEFORE I'LL BE A SLAVE
I'LL BE BURIED IN MY GRAVE
AND GO HOME TO MY LORD AND BE FREE.

(Enter SHERIFF with YOUNG LOUISA and BRONSON.)

YOUNG LOUISA: *(tearfully)*

Oh Jonesy! It breaks my heart to see you in there!

JONESY:

Don't cry, Louy. It's good to see you. You too, Brother Bronson.

YOUNG LOUISA:

But it's all my fault! I'm so awfully sorry. I'm a very bad person.

JONESY:

What do you mean?

BRONSON:

Calm yourself, Louy. I told you, this is no time to be emotional. Maintain your composure and speak like an adult.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(after a deep breath and a sigh)*

I was writing a new play. A real rouser, with two villains: a morally bankrupt prince and a landlord with a heart of stone...

BRONSON:

Get to the point, Louy.

YOUNG LOUISA:

...And I was fetching props to use. I needed an official-looking document to look like the deed to a grand piece of property. I tried to *make* something but it looked like a rag, because, well, I made it out of a rag. And then I found your freedom papers. They looked perfect—so official, such grand handwritin’. So... I took ‘em. And then... I forgot I took ‘em. I didn’t know they were so important. I was an idiot not to read what they said.

JONESY:

Now, Sister Louy, try real hard to remember. What did you do with those papers? Where are they now?

(The SHERIFF holds them up.)

Oh, hallelujah! Am I free to go?

SHERIFF:

You’re free to go, Jonesy.

(The SHERIFF unlocks the door and opens it. JONESY steps forward. YOUNG LOUISA hugs him tightly. SHERIFF returns the papers to them and exits.)

JONESY:

I was worried I’d never have my freedom again.

BRONSON:

We’re extremely upset with Louisa. She must learn to consider the effects her thoughtless actions have upon others.

JONESY:

Oh, I forgive you, Louisa.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I knew in my heart that you’re just as human as we are.

JONESY:

What made you think I wasn’t?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Mr. Lane. He thinks Africans are dangerous animals.

JONESY:

Brother Bronson, why you let that Mr. Lane stay at the farm? I won’t call him Brother Charles. That hateful man ain’t my brother.

BRONSON:

Mr. Lane is still at the farm, yes.

JONESY:

Why don't you tell him to leave? He don't do any work.

BRONSON:

Because... *he owns the land.*

YOUNG LOUISA:

He does?!

JONESY:

Ahhh, *that's* why he wanted to be anonymous. He's got us to work his farm, while he fiddle-farts the day away, professin' to be holy and pure!

BRONSON:

I'm beginning to suspect he is not entirely what he claims to be. But for the time being, we must honor our contract to sustain the farm as best we can. We don't have any choice.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*swearing*)

Christopher Columbus!! I wish there was something I could do.

JONESY:

There is, Sister Louy. Next time Mr. Lane says somethin' you don't like, march right up and tell him so, right to his face. You hear me?

YOUNG LOUISA:

I hear you, Brother Jonesy. Papa, do you agree?

BRONSON:

Yes. Now, come. Your mother is very anxious for us to be home.

JONESY:

How fares Brother Wood?

YOUNG LOUISA:

He's not been the same since you've been gone.

JONESY:

I know why, poor fella. Let's get home, quick as we can. Come on!

(BRONSON, YOUNG LOUISA, and JONESY exit.)

Act II, Scene 3: Fruitlands Farmhouse Attic. Later. Evening.

(YOUNG LOUISA, NANCY and ABBY are seated, mending torn clothes by candlelight.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Did you *know* Mr. Lane owned the farm?

NANCY:

We figured it out.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Marmee, why isn't Mr. Lane an Abolitionist?

ABBY:

Because there's naught so queer as folk.

YOUNG LOUISA:

What does that mean?

NANCY:

It means there's no way to explain how different folks can be. Some make up their minds to be fair and kind and generous, as we aim to be. But other folks are afraid.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Afraid of what?

NANCY:

Afraid that something they've believed their whole life is changing, so their whole world is going to fall apart. Afraid of things they don't understand. Afraid something'll be taken away from them.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Taken away? Like what?

ABBY: *(snappish)*

Louy, stop pestering. We don't have the energy to explain things all night. *(Sigh.)* I'm sorry. I'm just so weary. If anybody should ask me the way to Boston right this moment, I should say it was in the oven.

(A brief silence. YOUNG LOUISA looks worried and chews on her fist.)

What is it, Louisa?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Nothing. I’m just... hungry.

ABBY: (*losing her temper*)

That breaks it. (*She starts putting things into a bag.*) I’ve had all I can stand.

NANCY:

Abby, what are you doing?

ABBY:

What was I thinking, marrying a man with his head in the clouds all the time? Louisa, the reason I want you to know how to keep house and sew, is because we can’t rely on Papa to provide for us. His lecturing doesn’t bring in a living. We must always find ways to support ourselves. You must learn to be independent.

YOUNG LOUISA:

But we don’t have to worry about that, as long as we’re living here at Fruitlands!

ABBY:

“Fruitlands,” *pffft!* That name is such a cruel irony. We are going to leave here and never look back!

YOUNG LOUISA:

Leave? What do you mean?

ABBY:

I’m not going to sit here starving to death while the men enjoy their experiment in holy living. Pack your things, Louy.

YOUNG LOUISA:

What about Papa, is he coming with us?

ABBY:

I don’t care.

YOUNG LOUISA:

But you—you *must* care! We can’t leave Papa!

ABBY:

The men expect us to work and work and deny ourselves every imaginable comfort.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Let’s tell them! We should explain—

NANCY:

We’ve tried. Our opinions are never considered. Men make all the decisions.

ABBY:

We’re like beasts of burden. Even the oxen get more respect.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I thought Transcendentalists want all people to be equals!

ABBY & NANCY:

Except for women.

YOUNG LOUISA:

But that would make them hypocrites.

NANCY:

It’s true. They proclaim their support of Universal Suffrage, but inside, they don’t want women to vote.

ABBY:

They want us raising children and putting supper on the table. Nothing will change that, short of a revolution. That’s why young folks like you have to find your voice and speak out. Before it’s too late. Nancy and I—we’re already burdened with our lives. We need you to fight for us. Fight for our right to be heard! (*She’s beginning to cry.*)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Marmee, what’s the matter?

NANCY:

She’s very tired, Louy.

ABBY:

Louisa, promise me you’ll learn to be independent, and not rely on your father or me to help you, if we can’t. You have the misfortune to be an Alcott. We’re famously loud and silly and destitute! Everyone knows we fail at everything we try. You must work at being grown up. You can’t be a topsy-turvy tomboy any more!

YOUNG LOUISA:

I don’t know *how* to be a grown-up! I try to be serious, I try to improve myself, but I’m no good at it, Marmee! I’m sorry! Please let’s stay here with Papa, please!

ABBY: (*relenting*)

We’ll stay, but on one condition: no more wild, willful, thoughtless antics. You must promise to be my rock, Louisa. I need your strength. I can’t do this without you.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I promise. And here’s another promise: I’ll be rich someday, and I’ll pay for everything! And we’ll eat turkey and goose and—and chops every day. And you

won't have to worry about me, or Papa, or anything else! I promise! (*YOUNG LOUISA and ABBY hug tightly, tearfully.*) *I promise!*

(LIGHTS crossfade. Exit ALL including LOUISA.)

Act II, Scene 4: A Road in the Forest. Evening.

(LANE and BRONSON walking, carrying lanterns to light their path.)

BRONSON:

Four miles sure seems longer at night. Especially with this confounded toothache. Makes me miss my horse and wagon.

LANE:

You shouldn't miss them, Brother Bronson! You should be *glad* your old horse isn't suffering under a burden. Don't preach this life to others if you don't feel its truth in the marrow of your bones.

BRONSON:

Oh, please—we're done lecturing the Shakers. Don't waste your breath on me. I know you're just taking advantage of the Transcendentalists for your own gain.

LANE:

That is simply not true! My motives have always been devout.

BRONSON:

I don't believe you. And you continue to insult everyone without apology.

LANE:

I am doing exactly what we all agreed I would do. This experiment requires strict discipline. Your mind is clouded, Brother. Clouded because of your relations. Women are a distraction. That yearning should be directed towards heavenly practices, not earthly ones.

BRONSON:

Are you saying I shouldn't have married?

LANE:

Those Shakers have the right idea! Celibacy! Subdue the desire for fornication and self-glorification through the bearing of children! How can you concentrate on achieving a pure life if you're constantly preoccupied by sex?

BRONSON:

Sex is a natural, pure expression of God's plan! How else will there be children to become the Transcendentalists of tomorrow?

LANE:

If Louisa grows up to be a Transcendentalist, I'll eat my hat!

BRONSON:

You'd change your opinion about women if you were enjoying the pleasures of the marriage bed.

LANE:

I *would* marry if I thought my wife wasn't obsessed with having babies, like yours! The whole pack of you are a tremendous disappointment.

BRONSON:

We're disappointing?!

LANE:

I'm supposed to tolerate that obnoxious child, those headstrong women, non-believers, nudity, swearing, and a Negro slave under the same roof!

(Shocked, BRONSON slaps LANE's face.)

BRONSON:

Don't you *ever* disparage anyone under our roof *again*. We are all equal in the eyes of the Lord. I should like you to take my name off of your London school. You've clearly failed to grasp my philosophy.

LANE:

I *have* mischaracterized you, Alcott. I thought you were a bold visionary. Now I see: You're nothing but a deal of hot air. No wonder your school here was a disaster.

(BRONSON is furious but maintains his reserve. He bites his lip and drops his head.)

BRONSON: *(finally)*

I once hoped Fruitlands would be such a success that the entire Earth would be transformed by it. Now I see it's not destined to last even one year. The world was clearly not yet ready for a divine Utopia.

LANE:

Oh, spare me your eternal blathering, Alcott. I'm going to instruct our trustee Mr. Emerson to sell the property. Then I won't have to listen to you any longer.

BRONSON:

Well... I'd hoped to celebrate Louisa's birthday on the 29th. I was going to invite Mr. Emerson and Mr. Thoreau. While everyone's gathered, we'll make our plans to dissolve the farm.

LANE:

Do as you please. I’m going to talk to the Shakers about joining their community. They have the right ideas.

(LANE scurries off towards the direction they came from. BRONSON shakes his head sadly and continues walking alone towards home as the LIGHTS crossfade to:)

Act II, Scene 5: Fruitlands Common Room. A week later (day/snowing).

(LOUISA enters and narrates from the lectern.)

LOUISA:

“I was not privy to that conversation; my father repeated it to me afterwards. About the time the meager crop was ready to house, some call of the Oversoul wafted all the men away. An easterly storm was coming up and the bags of grain were sure to be ruined. The women gathered their forces, consisting of themselves and four little girls—YES, there were, in fact, four of us—and my mother got in the grain with the energy of a mother-bird with a brood of hungry nestlings to feed.”

(YOUNG LOUISA enters and dictates.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

“November 29th, 1843. Today I am eleven, and I have a lot of questions. How can I be more grown up? How can I be stronger for Marmee? How can one person make the world a little better? How do I keep the promises I make? I wish I was as good at answering questions as I am at asking them.”

(Lights up on the Common Room. The chimney is being decorated with homegrown garlands by JONESY and ABRAHAM. NANCY and ABBY set the table with tough-looking bread and meager, pale apples. LANE and BRONSON sit apart from the others, arguing about something we can’t hear.)

(PALMER enters at the front door, sprinkled with snow, and carrying a bucket of water.)

YOUNG LOUISA: *(continued)*

(Gasp!) Oh look, it’s snowing! How wonderful!

PALMER: *(sarcastically)*

Hurumph. Wonderful. Jonesy, will you put blankets on the beasts? I won’t have them dying of cold. *(He hangs the bucket over the fire.)*

JONESY:

Happy to, Brother Joseph. Brother Wood, you comin’ with me? (*JONESY and ABRAHAM exit out the door.*)

BRONSON:

Brother Palmer, I wonder if I might prevail upon you.

PALMER:

How so?

BRONSON:

I have a sore tooth. It’s just back here—(*He opens his mouth widely and points*)

PALMER:

What? I ain’t no dentist.

BRONSON:

You don’t need to be. You know about caring for farm animals.

PALMER:

You ain’t no cow.

BRONSON:

Cows and people aren’t so different, are they? Now look at this... (*opens his mouth*)

ABBY: (*to NANCY*)

If this is taking things too far, I apologize. It’s ridiculous that we can’t visit a proper dentist.

NANCY:

Joseph can handle himself in any situation, Abby. Don’t you worry.

BRONSON: (*as PALMER touches his face*)

Ow ow ow!

PALMER:

That molar’s diseased. It’ll have to come out.

BRONSON:

Then let’s have it! Pull it out. Right this minute.

PALMER:

That don’t seem fittin’ at your daughter’s birthday party.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Oh, I don’t mind! It’ll give me something to write about. Will there be blood?

PALMER:

A good deal of blood, yes.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ooh! You could do it right here—there’s already a stain on the floor.

PALMER:

(Sigh!) I’ll fetch my pincer from the barn.

BRONSON:

Perfect!

(PALMER goes out the door.)

YOUNG LOUISA: *(dictating)*

“Thus the day’s celebratory plans took a curious turn when my grand-il-o-quent father insisted that Moses remove a diseased tooth from his head, in the same way that farmers might help an ox or a horse with a similar complaint.”

LOUISA:

Very good. Your style—it’s improving.

YOUNG LOUISA:

See? I told you I was already a writer. *(To the FAMILY)*. Sorry, should I go upstairs to write in my book?

LANE:

Yes.

EVERYONE ELSE: *(simultaneously)*

No!

NANCY:

I find it very funny.

LANE:

Well, I don’t. A proper waste of time and paper that could be spent doing something productive.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Brother Charles! *(LANE looks at YOUNG LOUISA. She sticks out her tongue and blows a raspberry at him.)*

LANE:

How dare you! Did you see that?

ALL: (*ad lib*)

No. See what? I didn't. (*Etc.*)

(PALMER enters with the pincers, looking mystified, followed by JONESY and ABRAHAM.)

PALMER:

Excuse me, everyone, but I must interrupt.

NANCY:

What is it, Joe?

PALMER:

When I walked into the barn, I found Brother Jonesy and Brother Wood... embracing. I asked 'em why, and they said they had somethin' they wanted to tell the family.

(Everyone is puzzled.)

ABBY:

What do you mean?

JONESY:

He means, we was a-kissin'.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Who were you kissing?

JONESY:

Each other.

(There is a ripple of confused murmurs.)

LANE:

Sodomites?!

ABBY:

Louisa May, leave the room.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I most definitely am *not* leaving this room. I'm eleven now. I'm staying right here.

JONESY:

Now everybody, just relax and let me explain. Brother Wood and me, we ain't no Sodomites. We ain't done nothin' sinful. We just grown very fond of each other. It's kind of... an experiment. Like Fruitlands is an experiment.

LANE:

A man should not lie with another man. It's an abomination.

BRONSON:

Jonesy, did you and Brother Wood lie together?

JONESY:

Yes, but not like a man lies with a woman. We was jus' comfortable. And affectionate, like two close friends.

YOUNG LOUISA:

There's nothing wrong with that, is there?

ABRAHAM:

I'm gonna speak my piece here, dammit. (*Ahem*) I like you Transcendentalists. You understand how to have a direct, personal relationship with God. God speaks to me, as you all know. So when God says to me “Wood Abraham, Brother Jonesy is your dear friend, and you ain't never had no dear friend before,” I listened. I believed Him. I needed a dear friend, and now I got one. So if any one of you thinks we're sinners, well, then you're a damned hypocrite. You can't preach about lovin' your neighbor without agreeing that Jonesy and I are... are...

JONESY:

Deeply affectionate friends. Everybody right with that?

(A thoughtful nodding of heads.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

I'm putting *all* of this in my book. This is the best birthday present ever.

(LANE opens his mouth to speak.)

BRONSON:

Lane, not another peep out of you.

YOUNG LOUISA:

I'm very happy for you both. Jonesy—(*kisses his cheek*)—Wood—(*kisses his cheek*)—but don't worry, I *will* change your names in my book.

PALMER: (*waving the pincers*)

You still want that tooth out, Brother Bronson?

BRONSON:

Yes please.

PALMER:

I reckon I’ll wash these. *(He walks to the fireplace and dunks the tool in the cauldron for several seconds.)* You’ll want to dump out this water or your soup will taste like—well, never mind. Brother Bronson, are you ready?

BRONSON: *(sitting)*

There’s no time like the present.

(NANCY puts a cloth over BRONSON’s chest, and stands nearby with a clean, hot rag. YOUNG LOUISA positions herself where she can get a good view.)

PALMER:

Well then, here we go. *(He begins to extract the tooth.)*

ABBY:

Well, let’s not all stand here staring, let’s put out the food. Has everybody washed their hands?

JONESY/WOOD/LANE:

Yes.

(BRONSON begins to moan as his pain increases. As everyone else gathers around the table, they begin to speak louder to be heard over the moans.)

ABBY: *(loudly)*

Brother Jonesy, Brother Wood, would you pass some bread down to this end?

ABRAHAM: *(louder)*

What kind of bread is this? *(He struggles to break a loaf in half.)*

NANCY: *(louder)*

It’s mostly cornbread, but I’m not sure! We’re almost out of grain, and it all got mixed together! Sort of a surprise!

LANE:

WOULD YOU ALL PLEASE CEASE THAT INFERNAL YELLING?!

(All noise and activity has built to a chaotic roar, which climaxes when PALMER succeeds in pulling the tooth. BRONSON yells in pained relief; NANCY rushes forward with her hot towel; YOUNG LOUISA shouts “Hooray” over and over; ABRAHAM succeeds in breaking the bread after repeatedly banging it on the edge of the table; and of course the front door opens as EMERSON and THOREAU enter, with baskets, sprinkled

*with snow, and perplexed at having entered at such an odd moment.
There is a brief silence.)*

EMERSON: *(dryly)*

Glad to see everything is going so swimmingly here.

NANCY:

Mr. Emerson, Mr. Thoreau! So glad to welcome you. Thank you for coming.

THOREAU:

I suppose today you should call us "Brother Henry" and "Brother Waldo," don't you think?

EMERSON:

No, I think "Mr. Emerson" will suffice, thank you. Where's my birthday girl?

(YOUNG LOUISA runs to them and curtseys.)

None of your curtseys for me, Louy. Give us a kiss.

(She kisses their cheeks, in turn. THOREAU hands her two gift-wrapped books. She squeals in delight.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Thank you! I can't wait to open them. You missed it: Moses, I mean Brother Joseph pulled out one of Father's teeth. It was a sensation! And Jonesy and Wood Abraham announced that they're in love.

THOREAU:

I beg your pardon?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Jonesy and Wood Abraham. They're "affectionate friends." Isn't that sweet?

(JONESY and ABRAHAM, sitting next to each other, raise their adjacent arms to display their clasped hands with intertwined fingers. They smile at each other.)

THOREAU:

Well, what a... surprise.

EMERSON:

Yes, I'm glad to see *something* successful came out of Fruitlands. Now, where shall we sit?

NANCY:

Everyone squeeze in.

(Everyone finds a seat around the table. YOUNG LOUISA stands.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

May I say Grace? *(The adults nod their consent. She hugs herself, trying to feel God within her body.)* Dear Lord, You may not recognize me, now that I’m eleven and striving to be a whole new person. Please help me to be strong so I can help my family. Help me to understand grown-up things, to be responsible and compassionate, and to make the world a better place.

EMERSON:

And bless this food...?

YOUNG LOUISA:

And bless this food, Amen.

ALL:

Amen. *(Everyone begins to eat.)*

YOUNG LOUISA:

May I open my presents now?

ABBY:

Of course. Here’s one from me.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Ooh, thank you, Mother! *(She unwraps a small package.)* A pack of cards! *(Squeal!)*

LANE: *(rising, furious)*

Cards are the Devil’s playthings! Sin and corruption follow!

BRONSON:

Brother Charles! Your rules no longer apply in this house.

LANE:

Still, I object to the—

ABBY:

Hold your tongue, please. *(LANE sits.)*

YOUNG LOUISA:

What do you mean, his rules no longer apply?

ABBY:

We’ll tell you later, Louisa. Open your gifts.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*unwrapping a book*)

Will you teach me a card game later, Mother? (*ABBY nods.*) (*Gasp!*) “Oliver Twist” by Charles Dickens!

EMERSON:

I think a sensational novel every once in a while is good for the imagination. Especially if it’s by this Dickens fellow. Wonderful writer!

YOUNG LOUISA:

Thank you Uncle Waldo. I’ll begin reading it tonight! (*She opens the final gift.*) Ooh, “The Lives of the Explorers.”

THOREAU:

As long as you have access to books, YOU are your own best teacher. You must read all you can and never lose your curiosity about the world!

YOUNG LOUISA:

I promise. Thank you everyone for coming to my party and for making my birthday so nice.

LANE: (*rising*)

Well then. The festivities dispensed with, I shall proceed with our announcement.

BRONSON:

Must you be in such a hurry?

LANE:

I see no reason to delay. The communal living experiment known as Fruitlands shall be dissolved immediately. Inhabitants of the farm have one month to find new situations and vacate the premises.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*shocked*)

What do you mean, dissolved?

PALMER:

Our crops have failed, Louy. We’ve no food and no money. The farm’ll be sold, and we must all leave.

YOUNG LOUISA: (*confused, looking at everyone*)

But—aren’t you all sad?

ABBY:

We knew this was coming.

BRONSON:

We were just waiting until we could gather everyone together. We decided to announce it tonight, since we knew we’d all be here.

YOUNG LOUISA:

You decided to announce it on my BIRTHDAY?!

LANE:

It was the most expedient choice. Now there is some business to discuss—

YOUNG LOUISA:

And everyone knew about it but ME??

(ALL reluctantly acknowledge the truth. YOUNG LOUISA, furious, begins to cry.)

THOREAU:

Louisa! I thought only children cried over such things. An eleven-year-old young lady copes with disappointment like a mature adult, doesn’t she?

(YOUNG LOUISA angrily forces back her tears and sulks.)

LANE:

There now, that went well, I think.

NANCY:

I think you’re the most oblivious man I’ve ever met.

EMERSON:

Mr. Lane, if I may ask, have you made plans?

LANE:

I have indeed. I am joining the Shaker community nearby. They have invited me and I have accepted. I look forward to following their own strict governance, and I welcome life in a celibate community, with no sexual distractions of any kind.

ABBY:

I think you’ll fit in quite perfectly.

THOREAU:

And when do you plan to go there?

LANE:

Immediately. I can go tonight. Now, if I like.

EMERSON:

Well then, I thank you for your months of service to our community. Goodbye.

BRONSON: (*extending his hand*)

We wish you all the best, Brother Charles.

(LANE, feeling awkward with mixed emotions, ignores BRONSON's hand. He puts on his coat, picks up his carpet-bag, and walks towards the front door. YOUNG LOUISA has a revelation and rises.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

Jonesy, is *now* that moment you were telling me about?

JONESY:

It's now or never.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Mr. Lane, I know now what the face of hypocrisy looks like. It's the face of a man who professes to be good while remaining ignorantly prejudiced against everyone who's different from himself. (*Hesitates*)—Papa, I don't know what else—

BRONSON:

Keep going, Louy.

YOUNG LOUISA:

If—If you truly want to make the world a better place through reformed education, then you must open your London school to students of every color, and treat them all fairly, and decently.

EMERSON:

Surely there's something else?

YOUNG LOUISA:

Um... Yes! If there is hard work to do, you should roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty alongside your brothers and sisters. For only *then* will you be welcome in the Kingdom of Heaven. (*Triumphantly*) There!

JONESY:

Amen.

ALL:

Amen!

(LANE opens the door and departs without another word.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

How was that?

JONESY:

Your teachers all agree: you just graduated.

(A roar of approval from everyone.)

EMERSON:

Well, now it’s a party. Henry, why don’t you open that second hamper?

(THOREAU pulls two bottles of wine out of a basket and begins to open one. There are gasps of surprise.)

I know we’ve had some bad news today, but the end of one chapter is the beginning of a new one, yes? So we wanted to celebrate, and acknowledge your months of self-sacrifice and hard work.

THOREAU:

So we brought a cake! *(There’s giddy excitement as he opens the second basket.)* And—a roast chicken.

(This elicits roars of approval. ALL fill their cups with wine.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

It seems so sinful.

EMERSON:

Fear not! Eating a drumstick will not condemn you to eternity in Hell. Let’s have a toast, shall we? Raise your glasses, all! *(They do.)* Fruitlands was not a failure. It produced a few edible apples, some unusually stout cornbread, a special friendship between two remarkable men, and quite unexpectedly, a young woman who has shed her childish chrysalis, to emerge into a strong, wise, and creative butterfly with seeming unlimited potential. To Miss Louisa May Alcott, who has always been—and always will be—a force of Nature.

ALL:

Hear hear! *(They drink.)*

YOUNG LOUISA:

That’s the first time I’ve tasted wine.

ABRAHAM:

It’s good, isn’t it? *(All laugh.)*

YOUNG LOUISA:

But Papa, where will we go if we can’t stay here?

EMERSON:

Before you discuss that, I have a question for the always-quiet Mr. Palmer.

PALMER:

Yes sir?

EMERSON:

Joseph: a skilled, sensible farmer like yourself would have made a success of this venture if the timing had been better, and if Mr. Lane’s draconian rules hadn’t tied your hands. Do you think, if you had a few years, you could develop this land properly?

PALMER:

Of course I could, and a right smart farm it’d be, too.

EMERSON:

Then I think it should be yours. The price is seventeen hundred dollars. The terms are... fifteen dollars a month for ten years. Would you like some time to think about it?

PALMER:

That’s a generous offer. Nancy?

NANCY:

Be still my heart! A man has asked for my opinion! The answer is Yes, Mr. Emerson.

ALL: (*ad lib*)

Hooray! Hear hear! (*Etc.*)

THOREAU:

Now, Louisa, you may proceed with your very important question.

PALMER:

I’d ask you all to stay, but I don’t think the Alcotts are cut out to be farmers.

ABBY:

We’ll miss you Joseph, Nancy, Jonesy—even you, Wood—but we’ll find a home. As long as I can sew and Bronson can chop wood, we’ll survive the winter.

(BRONSON chokes on a sob. YOUNG LOUISA goes to him.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

What is it, Papa?

BRONSON: (*emotionally*)

I’m sorry, my dear Louy. I have failed my family. I dreamed of Paradise, but now we must leave it behind.

YOUNG LOUISA:

Don't lose hope, Papa. That's what you always say. "Hope, and keep busy."

EMERSON:

Let's not worry about tomorrow for at least a few more hours. Not when there's cake and wine to enjoy.

ABBY & NANCY:

And chicken!

(ALL tuck into the goodies. YOUNG LOUISA stands on her bench and taps a fork to get everyone's attention.)

YOUNG LOUISA:

I love everybody in this room!

(ALL roar with approval. As the LIGHTS change, the two LOUISAS step Downstage as the rest of the ENSEMBLE bids each other goodbye and gradually disappear into darkness as JONESY sings "The Winter" #101.)

JONESY:

O THE WINTER, O THE WINTER,
O THE WINTER'LL SOON BE OVER, CHILDREN

(ALL join in the song.)

O THE WINTER, O THE WINTER,
O THE WINTER'LL SOON BE OVER, CHILDREN
YES, MY LORD.

(They are all gone.)

LOUISA:

You're a much better writer now.

YOUNG LOUISA:

How can you tell?

LOUISA:

You sound like a real person talking, not made of cardboard any more. Why don't you read that last bit? I think that's a better test of your education than any silly old recital. Go ahead, you're ready.

YOUNG LOUISA: *(to the audience)*

“There was a discontented girl who dreamed of all the things she wanted but couldn’t have. She lived on a farm with her father and his philosopher friends, who couldn’t grow enough food to feed themselves, but who dedicated their days to feeding their souls with high ideals.”

LOUISA:

“Transcendental wild oats were sown—and as futile as this crop seemed to outsiders, it bore an invisible harvest, worth much to those who planted in earnest. Precious little appeared in their storerooms beyond the satisfaction of a few months of holy living. To live for one’s principles is a dangerous speculation. We all make mistakes, but it takes many experiences to shape a life. We must get up, try again, and remain hopeful.”

YOUNG LOUISA:

“The little girl learned to count her blessings, and tried to deserve them, lest they be taken away entirely. For the rest of her days, she was never disappointed.” How was that?

LOUISA:

Let’s write something about our sisters next.

*(They turn to face Upstage, take hands, and walk away as the LIGHTS
FADE TO BLACK.)*

(CURTAIN. END OF PLAY.)