

Chapter One

Starting Out

*Work is an excellent medicine for all
kinds of mental maladies.... You can be
what you will to be.*

Louisa May Alcott, 1859, age twenty-seven

November 15, 1887

Dear Ms. Bakke,

I must start by confessing my confusion over the title "Ms." I hesitate to guess, since I thought I understood quite well that one is either married or not married. For that we have the thoroughly descriptive & pleasant "Mrs." & "Miss." Perhaps you will respond that the same distinction is not made for men. True, but I hope you will agree with me that there are infinite ways in which it would be foolish for women to follow the same pathways that men have built.

I fear that you have caught me feeling a bit low. I am tired, & the effects of my calomel poisoning are with me more than usual this week. Rest & quiet is my goal, & I must keep my correspondence to a minimum.

Even so, I admit that the singularity of this potential interchange is most intriguing. You say we are communicating across "time zones" in a way much imagined, but never reliably accomplished. I will have to take you on faith for that, as the concept of time zones is not familiar to me, although the railways are rumored to be trying to do something about time. Perhaps your letter is related? You say we are inhabiting different centuries? If so, this could be the most amusing correspondence I have had in years.

Back to your request. Perhaps if you can restate your interests in a more coherent manner, I will endeavor to respond in an economical & truthful way.

Yours sincerely,

Miss L.M. Alcott

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November 16, 2005

Dear Miss Alcott,

I am astonished and delighted by your return letter. This is quite an amazing trick we have discovered. We seem to be in the same month, but you are in 1887 and I am in 2005. I think we must tiptoe forward and act as if this happens all the time. Let's just quietly get on with our business, as your friend Henry Thoreau did when he assumed that sparrows resting on people's hands was normal, and so they did.

I feel as if I know you, a little, already. The more I read about you (do you know we have books about you?), the more familiar you sound to me. You are exactly the sort of person I want to be talking with these days. When I told my friend Cindy about you, I said, "I know Louisa! And I need to know her better." Cindy is our same age and lives in Philadelphia, near where you were born. She and I became best friends in college (women go to college all the time now) when we discovered we both liked the Stones better than the Beatles (they were two English musical groups). The 1960s was an unbelievably terrific decade for music. You would have liked it yourself - very experimental, loud and dramatic, with lyrics by handsome young men all about relationships, nature, and politics.

Anyway, now my friends and I have lived through some of the same things you have: earning a living, coping with illness, trying to make sense of crazy families, trying to do good and be good - all that work you have done so well. We admire you particularly because you had to do it from a standing start. We, helped partly by you and your wonderful Little Woman Jo March, had a running start.

I love the way you signed some of your letters to your women's suffrage correspondents "Yours for Reform of All Kinds." *Of All Kinds* - I wish more of us thought like that today. So many of the noisiest people today care about only one issue and have only one reform in mind. They shout about their one position as if it's the only idea in the world. It's quite annoying, because any sensible woman knows progress doesn't work like that. I don't want to dishearten you, but many of the battles you fought are still, one hundred and thirty years on, not won. But be assured that none of the causes you care about have been abandoned.

One definite improvement in the years between us is people's general health, at least in the United States and Europe. Very few people die of tuberculosis any more, or scarlet fever, or in childbirth. We no longer poison people with mercury as a treatment for typhoid either. But don't think we are rolling in magic potions and pills. We still make plenty of mistakes - some well-meaning, like your mercury, and some not. I was a hospital nurse too - when I was in my thirties, like you - and did some painful and expensive things to patients that we now know did them no good. Medicine remains more art and less science than most patients want to believe. It's not so different today from your friend Ralph Waldo Emerson's story:

On Wachusett, I sprained my foot. It was slow to heal, and I went to the doctors. Dr. Henry Bigelow said, "Splint and absolute rest." Dr. Russell said, "Rest, yes; but a splint, no." Dr. Bartlett said, "Neither splint nor rest, but go and walk." Dr. Russell said, "Pour water on the foot, but it must be warm." Dr. Jackson said, "Stand in a trout brook all day."

Patients today receive exactly the same conflicting advice for sprained ankles. Only the best doctors will acknowledge how little they know. Meanwhile, all sorts of new ailments have appeared, and as if the natural

ones aren't enough, we twenty-first century humans are continually inventing new ways to hurt ourselves and each other.

So there's much left to do, in medicine and everywhere else. Winning the vote for women, which finally made it into the Constitution in 1920, was, as you and your mother accurately predicted, only the opening act. Ending slavery in the South has turned out to be barely the first chapter of a very long and bloody story. We keep thinking we are reaching the happy ending and then the plot stumbles, and there we are, back near the difficult beginning. Sometimes things inch along for the better; sometimes nothing much changes.

I know you said life was your college, but would that have been your preference, if you'd had a choice? Or were you just doing your usual trick of making the best of the hand you were dealt? Women today are as likely as men to go to college. Women today run their own companies, and become U.S. senators, Supreme Court justices, governors, and mayors (not president yet, though). They are engineers, explorers, and scientists. Much of what your friend Margaret Fuller advocated so boldly in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* has come to pass.

But all that higher education and honorable work doesn't stop us from occasionally devouring romantic novels about illicit love and tragic loss between wild, doomed, and always beautiful people. You like those tales too, don't you? Enough to write a few of your own, we have discovered. You should congratulate yourself, though, that your pseudonym A. M. Barnard kept your potboiler identity secret for almost one-hundred years until 1943.

Remember that section in your novel *Modern Mephistopheles*, where you had the evil Helwyze giving hashish to unsuspecting little Gladys? You gave her quite a night. From my own experience, I'd say you were writing from personal experience yourself:

"By this time Gladys was no longer quite herself: an inward excitement possessed her, a wild desire to sing her very heart

out came over her, and a strange chill, which she thought a vague presentiment of coming ill, crept through her blood. Everything seemed vast and awful. Every sense grew painfully acute. She walked as in a dream, so vivid, yet so mysterious, that she did not try to explain it even to herself. Her identity was doubled: one Gladys moved and spoke as she was told - a pale, dim figure, of no interest to any one. The other was alive in every fiber, thrilled with intense desire for something, and bent on finding it, though deserts, oceans and boundless realms of air were passed to gain it."

And the *Atlantic Monthly* thought Nathaniel Hawthorne's son Julian had written it!

But, back to the reason for my letter. I am sitting in 2005 Seattle, looking back, looking ahead, and wondering if age is weakening my rudder and ripping my sails. I think it's time for a little course correction. You seem to have kept your rudder and sails in near perfect trim your whole life. That's why I think our correspondence might be worth pursuing.

What do you think? Might we try?

Yours truly,

Kit Bakke

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November 25, 1887

Dear Mrs. (and I am taking a wild guess here) Bakke,

Although your enthusiasm is apparent, mine quails at the thought of so many battles still not won. I am not at all well these days, & expect death is waiting not so patiently around some nearby corner. Some days I am sure today is the day, & others I feel a bit better. Since Mother died, I often feel as if I am just marking time. I have been trying to work on a new story,

however. I have a plan to smash through some of my old difficulties, at least on paper. That cheers me up.

You do ignite some new sparks, I must admit, with your offer of conversations about nursing and all the other old battles. I often think of my dear boys. We nursed both Union & Confederates, you know, & a wounded boy is a wounded boy, whatever the color of his uniform. Their clothes were mostly blown off them anyway, by the time they got to us.

You like my old blood-&-thunder stories? How did you learn that I am A. M. Barnard? Not that I didn't leave a trail a mile wide. Little Woman Jo, as you put it, wrote for the *Weekly Volcano* & the *Blarneystone Banner*, remember? Everyone knew I was Jo. Like her, I always loved my gothic stories. Still do! My tortured lovers were such a treat to invent. Sometimes I went beyond what even the lurid penny dreadfuls were willing to print. I don't know what was the biggest thrill - the unpredictable & violent heroine exacting painful revenge on the man who wronged her, or all the background mayhem of suicide, incest, mistaken identity, gambling, hatred, murder, love without marriage, marriage without love, hashish, opium & lonely castles in the cold, slanting moonlight. But I was always careful to put a trace of goodness in all my sinners. Just like life.

I can still quote whole passages from those stories, even to this day. "The rich hue of the garnet velvet chair relieved her figure admirably, as she leaned back, with a white cloak half concealing her brilliant dress. The powder had shaken from her hair, leaving its gold undimmed as it hung slightly disheveled about her shoulders. She had wiped the rouge from her face, leaving it paler, but none the less lovely." Ah, yes.

Even in 1869, as *Little Women* was sealing my fate, I wrote that little *Perilous Play*, where everyone takes hashish to while away a boring afternoon, & true love results. "Heaven bless hasheesh, if its dreams end like this!" says my hero Mark as he wins Rose's heart after they are nearly drowned in

the storm. Did you notice how I kept hiding the moon behind threatening clouds? Fantasy is such fun.

I am pleased, as any author would be, to know that my touch is still appreciated. But I must push such delightful reveries aside for the moment, as I have an inkling that you have some work in mind for me. Never let it be said that Louisa May Alcott shies away from work. It was my publisher Mr. Niles who suggested I try a girls' book, & even though the idea didn't much interest me, I took it up. So, I ask again, what are you proposing?

Yours truly,

Miss L.M. Alcott

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