

*The Marmee Dress*

I became Marmee when I got the dress. It's not anything I would've ever picked out for myself, but the costume designer said it's for "all body types." I asked her what my body type is and, after a second too long, she answered, "willowy." I'll take it.

The Marmee dress is a knee-length "Summer Casual Floral Geometric-Pattern Short Sleeve Midi V-Neck Maxi Dress with Belt." That's how it's listed online. We ordered a size small, knotted the belt tight above my hips, and sewed up the V neck. I won't pretend to have cleavage. "Suitable for nude or light-colored underwear," so I wear gray briefs and a pair of secondhand tights. The production doesn't have the budget for heels in men's 11, so Marmee will just have to wear sneakers. She needs the arch support anyway.

Marmee was a nurse before she became mother to the four title characters of *Little Women: The Musical*. Now as a full-time, capital-M Mom, she fills her days by volunteering at the hospital, knitting hats for the troops, and trying to raise the girls without her perpetually offstage husband. He's gone away to serve in "the war." It doesn't really matter which war because our version of *Little Women* exists out of time, in some alternate Massachusetts where there are no cars, scarlet fever is still a death sentence, and Marmee is a transgender woman who wears pastel-colored maxi dresses. We may have taken a few artistic liberties.

"It's gender-blind casting," Rhea told me when the show was announced on every bulletin board on campus. She's the reason I auditioned. She wanted us to do something together before I graduated and moved out into what the Career Development Office calls "the real world." This college one is fake.

"Oh, good, I can't see my gender either," I said back to her. But after the cast list went up, I was the only one who had to spend three hours with the director coming up with canon-compliant explanations for how my character exists in this world. The director called this "background flavor." Our Marmee eloped with her husband to escape a conservative hometown. Our Marmee never told the girls they were adopted, but surely they can figure it out. She makes her own dresses because she gets nervous in women's clothing stores and holds her bladder until she can find a

single-stall restroom. Of everything in her old life, Marmee misses her mom the most. Her mom who taught her, by example, to remove her nail polish every Saturday night and paint them fresh for the week ahead. Three coats with sealant, every time.

“Christopher Columbus!” Jo, my most plot-relevant daughter, shouts several times in the opening scene. This is her substitute for “Jesus Christ,” because I guess Louisa May Alcott found colonialism less offensive than blasphemy, but she didn’t have a liberal arts college audience in mind. Because of copyright laws, we aren’t allowed to touch the script, not even for an undergrad musical adaptation no one asked for, but I whisper new lines in the wings while waiting for my cues. “If I didn’t have to send these brats to college,” I say while feeling out the hard lines of my chest, “I could buy myself a pair of tits.” Rhea laughs at all my jokes, even though, as the assistant stage manager, she’s only supposed to speak backstage when signaling set changes. She’s not supposed to text either, but when I go back on, she’ll pull out her phone again. She texts faster than anyone I’ve ever seen, flying from one notification to the next in a whack-a-mole effort to maintain her many long-distance friendships. I guess after I graduate, I’ll be one of them.

“We’ll be known as the family with the criminal sister!” This is Meg, onstage, giving me my cue to get ready. Meg is Marmee’s oldest daughter, her namesake, arguably the most responsible of the four girls, and also the least interesting. (The first kid is the test run anyway, right? Parents of only children are just quitters.) Meg’s two character traits—“girly” and “romantic”—make her second-act marriage one of determinism, no explanatory “background flavor” needed.

Just behind the curtain, I carefully smooth my skirt over my thighs—the skin is still sensitive and scabby there—and then stride onstage, into Marmee. I become a woman who has seized the title and branded it onto her own heart. Marmee’s every movement has purpose, direction. She has come, once again, to save the day, as only a mother can.

“I had a wonderful time,” Meg tells the family after coming home from the first act’s ballroom scene. “Actually, I had the best time of my life.” The actress is wearing her own prom dress. “I may have left here a girl, but I came home a woman.”

“A woman? Wh-what is she talking about?” I say as Marmee. It’s one of my only intentionally funny lines in the show, but I get only a few chuckles from the back. Everyone else just watches.

There are a lot of parents who came from out of town for opening night, and I’m not sure what they’ll make of me. Did their kids warn them ahead of time? I would’ve had to tell my parents, of course, if they were coming. They’re not, and neither are Rhea’s, so before the next day’s matinee, she and I have cereal together in the dining hall while most of the cast goes out for family brunch. Half will go to a riverside café with pulpy orange juice and a dress code. The others will walk to a 24-hour diner famous for late-night mozzarella sticks.

Rhea keeps me company after breakfast while I try my best to put on makeup. It’s never as easy as everyone makes it look. “So I think I’m going to finally meet up with Billy,” she says and makes me drop my eye-shadow brush into the sink.

“Actually?” Billy is Rhea’s internet boyfriend. Not officially, but basically. They’ve been chatting online since they were both in middle school on opposite sides of the country, but the only thing that’s really changed for their relationship is the platform. MySpace to Facebook to Tumblr. Now I think they Snapchat and send each other Instagram memes.

“For real this time,” Rhea says. Her face is serious, even as she sits on the counter and kicks her snow boots out in front of her. She wears them anytime there’s even a light dusting on the ground. I’m going to have to Febreze her feet after the show. “I should’ve done it right after he moved to the city, but, you know . . . I’m *self-conscious*.” This last bit she stretches out like taffy. She tries to laugh it off, but I know she’s serious.

The other girls let me use their bathroom because they like to help. Sometimes they stop me before I’ve started. Can they tell I’m not qualified to use eyeliner? They crowd in to stab at my waterline and pound my face with Barbie-pink blush and get their turn with the Makeup Marmee doll. But for now, it’s just Rhea and me, and she knows better than to try and help. I blend my eyeshadow with my pinky tip, but it comes off in clumps. “Wow, that’ll be a big step.” My voice is still morning-low and scratchy. I clear my throat and hum myself an octave higher. “Do you think . . . I mean, are you excited? Are you ready to meet him this time?” There have been plans for meet-ups before, all canceled last-minute.

Rhea uncaps my lipstick and twists the Crayola-red tube in and out. It's the only makeup I'm not borrowing from the Drama department. I bought it on Amazon hidden in a shipment of school supplies and toiletries I didn't really need. "It's time," she says like a bride on her wedding day. "I'm ready, and I think he is too."

"Wow. Well . . . good. When are you meeting him?" Wait, was I supposed to put on the mascara before the eye shadow? Or after? Shit.

"Tonight," Rhea says. From the corner of my eye, I can tell she's not looking at me. She's looking at a wall flyer for free tampons in every women's bathroom on campus. On it, there's a stock photo of a blonde cheerleader jumping for joy. "And it's a date."

"Tonight? Already?" I give her a sideways glance. "He said it was a date?"

"Well, yeah." Rhea sets her jaw. "He said, 'It's a date.' We're going for ice cream in Midtown. It's close enough to walk." She gathers up her hair, thick and dark, and starts maneuvering it into a braid.

Worry prickles at the back of my head. I set down the makeup case and take the lipstick from her hands, which are always warm and soft against my touch. "Alone?" I ask, but I shouldn't be surprised. Rhea's known Billy for years, much longer than she's known me. And it's not like I haven't met up with guys off the internet before. Well, one guy, who didn't give me his name, or the romantic pretense of an ice cream date.

I don't really remember the walk over to him. He is Boy #2 in my head, but he makes only a guest appearance between Boys 1 and 3. I remember parts of the way there: dew flicking up off the grass, and the starless sky over the quad, and the bumble-buzz of vodka in my chest. This was back when drunk-walking was a fun, new experience. Oh, hey! Balance is hard! And then I'd laugh to myself, and the other drunk-walkers around me would laugh too, all of us on unsteady commutes to different parties and appointments on campus. We were sharing a nice crack-up when Boy #2 and I finally found each other.

He kept one arm around me in that way I loved, his fingers hooked onto my waistband, pressed into the puckered skin beneath. "Your room or mine?" he growled. He sounded ridiculous, like he'd been studying the scripts of sex scenes but had never seen one in action. I wanted to play along though. We both smelled like

hairspray.

"I don't have roommates," I said, cool as the air. I didn't want him to know this would be my first time. Fumbling hands in the dark of my parents' basement didn't count. (Sorry, Boy #1.)

What I remember best is the walk after we were done. I was back in the quad, but alone this time, listening to the muffled thump of dorm parties waiting to get busted. The pain hadn't been so bad, just an unpleasant surprise, but I couldn't walk off the anticlimax. That was supposed to be fun, right? I had fun, I told myself. I'd done it right, for the most part. The first rule of improv is to agree with your partner. "Do you like it rough?" he had asked after we had stumbled into my room. Was I supposed to like it at all? I turned the lights off and he pushed me against the wall.

"Do you like that?" Mm.

"Do you like that?" Uh, yeah. Oh, baby.

I used to fantasize about a guy touching my legs, sanctifying the cuts criss-crossing my skin. But when Boy #2 grabbed at them, he pretended like they weren't there. The scabs cracked like glow-sticks. "Do you like that? Huh?" I ran out of porn soundbites to cycle through and clammed up until I couldn't take it anymore and asked him to leave. I think the whole thing took maybe 20 minutes.

"Of course I'll walk you there, if you want," I say to Rhea.

She nods. "I'd like that." And relaxes.

"Now tell me, do I have lipstick in my teeth?"

We grimace at one another in the mirror. "Pretty as a picture, Ma." I can't remember when she started calling me that. If she ever used my real name, it would break my heart.

"Not as pretty as you." I cap the lipstick and tuck a phantom lock of hair behind my ear, but only feel the cropped sides of an undercut. I hadn't asked for a wig, thinking I'd end up looking like a drag queen, or maybe just another onstage crossdresser waiting to be exposed by a punchline. Without the wig, I'm not sure what I look like besides just a kid playing dress-up. "Come on," I tell Rhea, and brush a very real strand of hair away from her watery eyes. She needs to change her contacts, but I won't nag her. "Let's go warm up."

"Would you rather put hornets in your cereal or lose your sense of smell forever?" Rhea asks on the subway after the show is over

and the props have been reset and the Marmee dress is back on its rack. Outside, the snow has thawed to rain, and the car is packed full. We hook our arms around the standing poles and lean out far with each turn.

“Why would I want to do either of those?” I ask. My jeans feel like sandpaper. I tug at the seams until I see a middle-aged man clock my nail polish and make a face I can’t read. After that, I keep my hands in my pockets.

“Because that’s the *game*.” Rhea is wearing one of my jackets. It’s a little long on her, but she likes the elbow patches, says they make her look smart. Her eyeliner wings are spread wide and her face sparkles. She is beautiful.

I angle myself away from the seats so that it’s just me and Rhea and the pole between us. “Why can’t it be something good?” I ask. “Like, ‘Would you rather do this nice thing or this other, equally nice thing?’ Then it’s hard because you can only pick one.”

Rhea laughs, snorts a little. The snorting was one of the first things I noticed about her in group counseling her freshman year, my junior. Rhea was the only one who laughed at my jokes. Everyone else just sat there, looking tragic, like maybe they’d be asked to leave if they didn’t seem sad enough. “That’s no fun, Ma,” she says. She’s smiling, but her grip on the pole is iron-tight. With our nail polish matching and our hands—mine white, hers a deep brown—stacked one on top of the other, it looks like a diversity plug in an Admissions brochure.

“Would you rather live in a cat colony or skip your next bio exam?” I ask. We laugh past our stop and have to backtrack three or four blocks on foot, but it’s okay. I think Rhea wants a little more time to settle her nerves anyway, and I want to help. “You know you can leave anytime you want to,” I tell her on the way. We are close and conspiratorial under my umbrella. “If you’re not having fun or if you feel uncomfortable, you can go to the bathroom and call me. I’ll just be down the street.”

“Don’t worry,” Rhea says to our feet. She is trying to keep her sneakers dry, but the sidewalk is a minefield of puddles. “It’s going to be good. I know it will. I mean, I know him. Have for years.” She carries her oversized purse with the strap across her chest, just like I told her to. “He’s one of the good guys.”

“People can be different in person.” I pass the umbrella to my other hand so I can hold onto hers, and we snake through a clump

of Vineyard Vine boys trying to keep their one-dollar pizza slices dry. "It might just take a little getting used to, is all I'm saying. It's okay if your first meeting is a little awkward." I speed up when the crosswalk ahead starts counting down from 12, but Rhea anchors us at the street corner, letting the pedestrian stream split and flow around us.

"Do you think . . . I'll be like what he expected?" she asks, eyes wide and nervous. Standing so close, her lavender perfume covers the tangy smell of the city.

"You just worry about being you," I say, trying to squeeze confidence back into her hand. "What more could he expect?" And then, for practicality, "Offer to split the bill once, but then just let him take it. That kind of thing can derail itself in a minute, trust me."

She leans in closer. "Okay, but what if he wants to. . . ." She raises her eyebrows and then looks away. "You know. . . ."

A sudden wind almost pulls the umbrella from me. "To *what*?" I don't realize I'm squeezing Rhea's hand too hard until she wrenches it away and I stumble back. A couple pushes past me. Their umbrella knocks against mine and a flare of anger shoots up behind my eyes, and then it's gone. I'm cool, I'm good. Everything is under control. "Rhea, I don't think you're going to have sex in the ice cream shop." She lets me bring her back under the umbrella, but stays at the edge, heels against a pile of slush that hasn't finished melting.

"Well not *in it*." She's spitting, and reaches up to smooth her hair. "You know what? Forget it. Forget I asked."

The little rain droplets on her jacket sparkle in the city light. "I'm sorry." I brush off her shoulders. "It's just, I'm a little surprised, you know? I mean, you've just met him."

"I *haven't* though." She insists, on the defense. "Billy's been there for me since middle school. He knows everything." But I do too. Since that first counseling session, Rhea's been an open book to me, spilling her secrets and insecurities like a bursting pipe. I know about her dead birth mom and her overachieving little sister and the bullies at school. I know she was a lonely child until her parents switched from dial-up to wireless internet, and it was her key to a new world. It's how she met Billy. From behind walls of text, he helped her feel beautiful again, the way she had as a child before it was first suggested to her that she might not be. Rhea

could tell me anything when it was just the two of us, but then at counseling, she'd go quiet again. The therapist thought she was shy.

Eventually we both stopped going. We had each other, and we'd decided that would be enough. I know more about Rhea's childhood than I do my own parents'. Is it my fault for not asking them to tell me?

The pedestrian walk light flips back on. Rhea starts down the street, and I speed up to keep her dry, holding the umbrella high above a canopy of others.

"Hey." I stop her in front of the glass doors of the ice cream shop. Its curb is spilling out with college kids I only sort of recognize from around campus. They seem different somehow with their faces flushed rosy in the streetlight. Is it that they're drunk or just happy? If Billy is drunk too, I'm taking Rhea home. "Just don't worry too much about sex yet, okay?" Yeah, right. Can I even hear myself? "Just have fun and get to know him and leave that for some other time. There's no rush." But there's always a rush. College is just a mad grab at adulthood, however close we can get at going through its motions before we have to play it more convincingly in the real world.

Rhea takes a breath and gives me one of her CoverGirl smiles, the kind she uses to get professors to extend her deadlines and me to buy her cheap, grocery-store booze. But her watery eyes don't quite find mine. "Right," she says, a little too brightly. She's a bad actor, but I'll let this one go. "Thanks, Ma."

I walk her to the door and watch from outside until a mopy-haired kid who must be Billy stands up and turns around and smiles. He looks like he could be 15, but to me, so does Rhea, and I know it's just because two years are a lifetime in college. After I graduate, I will be a child again, and Rhea will be here, maybe playing house with Billy, who wears his flannel shirt buttoned to the chin and awkwardly shakes Rhea's hand like he's at a job interview. Then Rhea pulls him into a bear hug that I can almost feel from outside the window. I watch a second longer to make sure he laughs at Rhea's opening joke, and then I cross the street to a coffee shop where I might finally get some work done. Or I'll just sit there and worry. My phone volume is turned all the way up, just in case. I keep it in my hand. Just in case.

By midnight, Rhea is in love. "And then, as we were leaving, he took my hand and he *kissed* it!" she tells me on the subway ride back to campus. And then again at breakfast the next morning. "He just took it and kissed it!" And once more on my way to get changed for the Sunday matinee. "It was just like I imagined it, but so much better. I mean, it was different, but it was better, you know?"

"I'll be right back," I tell her, and shut the door to the prop basement very slowly so it doesn't slam on her face. I go down there to change. In the absence of dressing rooms, everyone just strips in the wings, but no one gives me a hard time for sneaking away like an embarrassed seventh-grader dressing out for gym. Down in the dim basement, I lay my jeans on the face of a *Little Shop of Horrors* puppet and try not to tear more holes in my tights. They're sheer enough I can see the scars underneath, but then I let the hem of my dress fall over my thighs, and I am Marmee again.

The dress has no pockets, which the girls enjoy pointing out to me. "Now you know how it feels!" Yep. "Not so easy being a girl, is it?" No, it's not. So I just hold my phone instead, and I'm dialing Mom before I can even think of what to say.

"Hello?" She answers after the second ring.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetie. What's up?" I can hear the sizzle of vegetables on the stovetop, maybe two skillet full. She and Dad make enormous dinners on Sundays. "It's *meal prep*," Dad told me once. "Then we have lunch for the week!" He likes showing off his trendy lifestyle vocabulary.

"Oh, uh." I lean against a prop table full of 60's junk. My voice doesn't sound like me down here. "I'm just working on job applications," I lie, drumming my fingers on the table like a keyboard. "Just wanted to say hi."

"Oh, hello," Mom says. Is she happy I've been calling so often? Or worried? Does she think of it much between calls? "Did you check out that teaching job in KC? They need Spanish speakers!"

I bite back a sigh, remembering (too late) to be careful of my lipstick. It smudges onto my teeth and doesn't taste like anything. "I can barely read Spanish, let alone speak it." I gather up the end of my skirt in one hand, something I'll never get tired of doing, and sit on a leftover chair torn from the *Les Mis* barricade. "And I don't

really like kids anyway.”

“I’m just saying it’s an option,” Mom says, probably punctuating her sentences with a spatula. I imagine Dad sneaking more spices into the veggies every time she turns her back on the stove. “Did you watch *Battlebots* last night?” Mom asks. *Battlebots* was our current obsession, the perfect fusion of pro wrestling and engineering. When I was home for the summer, we filled out March Madness-style brackets using our encyclopedic knowledge on each competitor. The winner got a *Terminator* action figure as a trophy. Mom keeps it on her desk, next to a clay flowerpot I made in elementary school.

“No, Mom, I’m still a few episodes behind.”

A gentle *tok* on the other end, and then the steamy sound of pasta being drained, surely into the yellow colander with the broken handle. “Catch up, kid!” Mom’s voice crackles, probably because she’s holding the phone between her ear and shoulder, a skill I’ve never mastered. “Put off your homework and quit your activities and just watch TV. What, are you busy or something?” She laughs to herself.

I laugh too, but the sound is lost to the basement furnace spooling up for another cycle. “Something like that,” I say. Mom doesn’t know about *Little Women*. Well, she does, but she thinks I have Rhea’s job backstage.

“Hey.” Mom’s voice gets low and serious. “I’m really glad you’re applying for jobs closer to home. It’ll be nice to have you around again after graduation.”

I blink up at the ceiling’s yellow flypaper fingers. “Yeah,” I say. “Me too.” It’s these quiet long-distance moments that get me into trouble. When it’s just the two of us on the phone, I want to say too much. It’s how I came out to her as gay. It’s how I told her I was going on antidepressants. Both times I wanted her to say exactly what I needed to hear, just how I’d scripted it in my head. Answers would cue my next lines, and the next, until I could tell her everything. But neither conversation went how I’d planned. We haven’t picked them up since.

I didn’t even try to tell her about Boy #3. The boyfriend. A grad student who I still think of, sometimes, when I’m lonely and want someone to miss. We were not in love, me and Boy #3, but we liked pretending we were. “This is our song,” he’d say all the time, no matter what was playing or where we were: slowdancing at a

jazz club, watching Foo Fighters videos in the library basement, blowing all our laundry quarters on the diner jukebox. Being with him was like being in the middle of a romcom, before things get all screwed up in the final hour. We both went completely overboard for Valentine's that year, maybe knowing we wouldn't last till either of our late-summer birthdays. On a bed of store-bought rose petals, we had sex. It wasn't fun — does it ever get fun? — but it was good.

We barely said a word until he finished. "Do you want me to...?" He offered, but I kissed him no and had him hold me until sunrise washed out the sticky-tack stars on his ceiling. We lay with our knees knocked together in front of us, my hand resting on his thigh until he began to reach carefully for mine.

He looked at me. "Can I . . . ?" We had talked about my scars, briefly. Well, he had asked me if I wanted to talk about them, and I told him that there wasn't much to say. We all do dumb, self-destructive things, and some of it goes away, and some of it doesn't. That's all. "Could I touch your . . . ?" I never let him finish his questions. I was too eager with answers, too ready to lead his hand from my chest to my legs, desperate for his fingertips to trace the scar-tissue tracks, just as I'd imagined a boy doing ever since I started making them appear. They were almost completely healed back then. They didn't even itch.

He dumped me before finals week. I called Mom the next day, inconsolable. She let me cry as long as I wanted, even when I wouldn't tell her what was wrong. We didn't bring it up again after I came home for the summer, and when she asked about the fresh cuts that had crept carelessly past the hem of my shorts, I blamed them on the cat. She had him declawed.

Back in the quiet dark of the prop basement, I hear Rhea call down the stairs. It's time to warm up.

"Mom? I have to go," I stand and smooth out my dress. I'll never get tired of that either.

"Okay. We'll talk soon, yeah?"

"Yeah. Love you, Mom."

"Love you too, sonny."

The curtains go up and down on the first weekend of shows. We'll do cue-to-cue rehearsals until Friday, and the cast will drink hot

tea to preserve our voices, and the sophomore playing Laurie will get his lines down, he swears. But for now, I'm free to go catch up on the homework that's been piling up since auditions. That's the plan, anyway, until Rhea has a meltdown mid-week.

"He won't text me back. He just stopped after the date."

Rhea is not a sobber. She is a leaky faucet. Her tears come often and quietly. She looks like she hasn't been sleeping.

"Maybe he's just busy," I say, knowing it won't help and focusing on the stovetop instead. I'm making her favorite: breakfast for dinner. Okay, it's not her *favorite*-favorite, but eggs are the only thing I'm good at cooking. There are two skillets going at once, one for her omelet, all cheese, and one for mine, lumpy with mushrooms and spinach and peppers.

Rhea snuffles behind me. "No, it's not that. We've talked almost every day for years. Something's different now. I shouldn't have met him in person. He's decided he doesn't like me." She takes a noisy sip of bottled orange juice. We bought it in a dorm vending machine after she called me, hysterical. When I found out it was because of Billy, I held back a scream. I'd been pulling near-all-nighters all week, trying to catch up, and Rhea couldn't hold it together for just a few more days? Just until the show was over. But I kept my mouth shut and told her dinner would make her feel better. "I'm worried I ruined it, Ma," she says. When I turn around, her phone is close to her face, lighting up the kitchen cold and blue.

"I'm worried too." I flip Rhea's omelet onto a plate and set it in front of her. "Worried you're going to get scurvy unless you let me feed you vegetables." I think I can let this run its course if I just keep things upbeat and let her cry it out. I sit down across from her and realize I forgot to light the table's centerpiece, a dollar-store candle that we break out when Rhea comes for dinner. It makes us feel fancy. "Can you reach the lighter?" I ask. "It's behind you."

Rhea stops thumbing through her messages, looking for where she went wrong, and twists around to reach for the kitchen island. And it's as her hand closes on the cheap lighter, and her sleeve rides up, I notice them, the freshly pink lines vectored across her arms. Surprise socks me hard in the chest. The marks are thin and long and none of them quite touch. And I can imagine Rhea watching them well up with black beads of blood, and letting them

dry out into little crystals, and then rubbing them away to cherry-red powder while she kneels on the dorm room floor, feeling both better and worse, and worse, and worse.

I think I'm going to be sick. Rhea turns back around and sees my face. She is not yet good at hiding. She pulls her sleeve back down before she lights the candle. It takes two tries to get the wick to catch, and once it does, the window—which had before shown the first flecks of snow outside passing through the streetlight—reflects the image of ourselves back at us instead. We look tired.

When did she start? Is this just about Billy? I want to ask. But I don't, because I know it's never just one thing. Rhea is looking down at her plate, mouth open to a frown. She starts eating and I think I will too, despite the nausea, until my fork breaks through the skin of my omelet and I know I can't. I have to tell her to stop, that it's not going to help anything and it's stupid to think it will, but I remember my first heartbreak, back in high school when I thought I loved Boy #1.

It could've been any boy. He was just the first, after years of ambiguously charged sleepovers, to wake me with a hand sliding up my legs beneath the covers. "I always knew you were like me," Boy #1 said after we were done touching for the night, both of us staring up at the dark ceiling with a foot of space between us. I didn't say that I didn't think we were alike at all, but I thought maybe we could be, if we tried.

Months later, he decided he was done trying and I decided to start remaking my legs every night. And I kept doing it, long after I was over him, having let something out of myself that I couldn't put away again. Rhea, and everyone else I've met since, can only know this version of me that carries it. The me who has kicked the habit and picked it up again a dozen times. The me who still keeps a pocketknife in a nightstand drawer, behind five or six bottles of hand-me-down nail polish.

"I'm really sorry about Billy," is all I say to Rhea. "I didn't realize how much he meant to you." But I should have.

Rhea shrugs at me. Tears track through her foundation. "We don't have to talk about it," she says. "I know that . . ." She sets down her fork, chooses not to tell me she's seen my legs too, in those careless moments that I think must have happened, but we've never talked about directly. "I know you must be tired." Could she have gotten this from me? Another wave of nausea comes and

goes.

Under the table, I scratch at my thighs through my jeans. The itch is under my skin, though. It's TV static with the volume cranked, buzzing up my legs and into my head. I grab onto my thighs with both hands and squeeze.

Rhea's right. I am tired. "*Little Women* will be over soon," I say, squeezing harder until it helps, a little. It helps enough, for now. I can't ever admit to her that I miss the way cutting could turn the buzzing off completely for a whole night. "We'll need something else to do together."

"Like what?" Rhea looks older in the candlelight. She is waiting for me to say the right thing.

But I don't know what that is. I don't know if it's more counseling or yoga or one of those self-help books with smiling women on the covers. "We'll think of something," I say, sounding surer than I am.

Rhea takes a slow breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth. "All right, Ma." It's coming down harder outside. We start eating again, very slowly, bite after bite until it's done. I'll need to walk Rhea back to her dorm after we clean up. I know she didn't bring an umbrella.

That weekend, we go back to cracking jokes between scenes. Rhea's smile comes easily, but her sleeves stay down, even backstage where it's stuffy and hot. While waiting for my final scene on closing night, I fuss with the dress in the backstage mirrors, tying and retying the waist, expecting my shape to come out different. The props are everywhere. There's no show tomorrow that needs them reset. Rhea sits in the corner, her phone facedown on her lap. "You look beautiful, Ma," she tells me.

Oh. Surprise hits me again in my chest. I clear my throat. "Thank you, baby." I don't know when I'll be able to wear a dress again.

Onstage, I hear my last cue. I go out to say my last line and then I am no longer Marmee. We are ourselves again during the curtain call, all a little clownish and made up under the house lights. We squint through them, trying to see who came for us. I can't help doing the same, even though everyone I asked to see the show already did. I stop looking and join the rest of the cast for our

final bow.

It's only after we've called down the director and stage manager to give them bouquets that I see Rhea's parents in the third row. I recognize her dad's bald head from a daddy-daughter dance photo she shared on Father's Day. And her mom's lopsided smile is just the way it looks on Rhea's phone wallpaper, a picture of them proudly holding up an overcooked turkey, smoke still curling off its drumsticks. We've never met officially, but they must recognize me from pictures too because they're looking right at me. It's too dark to tell if they're smiling. When the audience begins to trickle down the steps toward the stage, I slip out the right side, where I know Rhea isn't standing with her sleeves pulled down, waiting to hug her parents. I am flushed with guilt. I can't meet them now.

Backstage is deserted. Even the crew has gone into the crowd. The costume racks are empty, just hangers labeled and sorted by character: Jo, Beth, Amy, Meg, Marmee. Once the racks are full again, the costume designer will wheel them back to the Drama department. They'll seal everything up in garment bags and tuck them away in the basement for a decade or so, until they run out of show ideas and decide to do *Little Women* again. I make sure I'm alone and then peel Marmee's tag off the hanger.

The first time I tried on the dress, Rhea was the only one there. After opening my eyes to the real me in the mirror—not the imaginary Marmee I'd spent months envisioning myself into—I was too nervous to come out and show her. I was six years old again, shut up in my bedroom and staring at myself in a Snow White skirt I'd gotten from my older cousins. It used to be cute for me to dress up and twirl around the kitchen, my skirt hem sweeping the floor. But then I'd gotten taller, and the skirt stopped touching the ground, and it wasn't so cute anymore. Rhea only got me to come out of the wings as Marmee by stuffing herself into Meg's glittering prom dress. "Chaperone me to the ball, Ma," she'd said, holding out the crook of her bare arm and escorting me onto the empty stage.

I am down in the prop basement again, scratching holes through my tights. I just need to catch my breath and then I'll go back up and celebrate. Just take a moment. Deep breaths. Stop touching your legs. Don't think about Rhea hugging her parents, arms stinging beneath her sleeves. Don't think about her hiding her arms until they heal, until she decides to let them. Look up at

the flypaper and blink hard and then go find other friends. Let them marvel at the dress, with its smart ribbon and modern hemline. Only \$17.99 on Amazon. “Who did your makeup?” they’ll ask. I’ll smile and say I did it myself, and then I’ll go put the dress back on its hanger and I’ll never be Marmee again. Everyone I meet after that won’t know about these few months when I was a mother, a good one. She was me and I was her. Margaret “Marmee” March.

Mom answers on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.” My voice is already losing its stage shine. I am sinking back down into my natural register.

“What’s going on?” A mother can tell when something’s wrong, but that’s where their intuition ends. They’ll have to ask if they want to know more. “Are you okay?”

The label from Marmee’s hanger is a wad in my fist. “Oh,” I say, dropping it onto a cluttered prop table. “Nothing. I just wanted to say hi.” I’m keeping the dress.



Christopher Woods, *Where Drama Begins*, photograph