

Becoming a Little Woman

By Alysse Foster

“But Meg . . . I . . .”

Shit! That’s my line! How could I have let this happen? I’m about to go onto my high school auditorium stage and act, yes act, and more importantly, in front of an audience, a BIG audience. I’m supposed to be the girl quietly enjoying the performance of “Little Women” safely, from an uncomfortable auditorium chair. How did I get to be the one behind the curtain about to emerge from a fake, poorly painted, plywood door on the actual stage, in front of actual people? Someone wake me up! I don’t like this dream anymore.

The first week of senior year was a fresh start for me, a last yahoo, and a time to get out there and do the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the terrifying. For as long as I can remember I’ve always been the quiet, shy girl in the class who hated speaking out, even in front of twenty kids I’d known since third grade. This last year was a time for change, a time for me to reinvent myself as an individual, to step outside of the box, and my miniscule comfort zone. When the audition sign ups for “Little Women” came out I looked at them several times, I watched as the list grew and changed, as names were added and removed. I watched that list for two days, all the time contemplating my plan of action: to audition, or not to audition, that was the question. Auditioning meant that I would have to get up in front of Mr. Grzeskowiak, a man who was an actor in New York City for years, a man who was not afraid to crush the dreams of one high school senior who never had the courage to go out for anything in her life.

2:30 p.m., half an hour before the audition list would be removed from the white tile wall outside of room 312, half an hour until I had to decide whether or not to stay that shy girl in

class, or to become the vibrant actress on the Marcus Whitman stage. I raised my pen to the wall . . . only a few more inches . . . the click of a pen . . . the ink on paper . . . the letters to form my name . . . and I would sign my future away. Then I did it. After the pen touched the paper, after the ink seeped into the pores, and A-L-Y-S-S-E F-O-S-T-E-R had been added to the list, I walked away from the white tile wall next to room 312. I moved down the hall with a feeling of dread underneath the freshly hatched butterflies fighting to escape my stomach. I continued down the hall, walked out the door into the sunlight, and onto the black paved parking lot to my little red car; it gave me time to contemplate my decision. The butterflies had all died and a different feeling had arisen. It was new to me. I was about to step onto uncharted territory and become an outgoing person; to some it would have been utterly terrifying, but I felt excitement. Yes, that was it, excitement; it started in my chest almost like heartburn, but it was pure unadulterated excitement. The feeling moved up my chest, into my throat and to my face as a wide brimming smile appeared. I got into my little red car and drove home.

My audition came sooner than I could have imagined. Before I knew it, I was outside of the auditorium doors looking through a script. I struggled to derive the character's emotions as I read through each line.

3:59, one minute left.

The last auditioner walked out and it was my turn to be judged. I walked down the sloping floor of the auditorium, up the wooden stairs, and onto the stage. The dread and butterflies had returned to my stomach.

"Start from your first line on page 41," was all that I heard.

In that moment someone else overtook me; over the dread and nausea, a strange feeling allowed me to read those lines in the best crotchety old woman voice that I could muster.

“What’s the front door open for?! I don’t approve of front doors being left open,” rasped this old woman from inside of my body. As I continued with my audition the voice became stronger and more confident: I had become Aunt March.

The actual audition only took about ten minutes, but my life was forever altered. While onstage, I had become a different person, a more confident girl who felt as if the world was hers for the taking. The rush of being onstage was a new high, a feeling so exhilarating that it would be impossible for me to live without.

“I’ll post the cast list tomorrow outside my door,” brought me back to reality.

I wanted, no, I needed to be on that cast list in the morning. I couldn’t live without the stage anymore, I was addicted. I went home on top of the world.

Going to bed that night was seemingly impossible. A feeling of exhilaration and fear prevented my thoughts from wandering away from that next morning. My fate would be typed onto a neat white sheet of paper bearing the cast list of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, a production of Marcus Whitman Visual and Performing Arts, Fall 2006. Eventually my consciousness faded into a restless sleep.

When I woke up the next morning, all that I could think about was that cast list, that little white piece of paper with or without my name on it. I went to school in a flurry of nerves. My emotions were no longer my own, they were fully and completely dependent on that list. I got to the parking lot of good old Marcus Whitman and I parked my little red car. I got out and began the eternal walk into the building and down the hallway, to room 312. When I finally got close enough, I could see that piece of white paper carefully taped outside of the door.

I drew nearer, afraid to see the results. Just a little bit closer . . . my eyes started at the top of the list, Jo . . . Meg . . . Beth . . . Amy . . . Marmie . . . Laurie . . . Aunt March . . . I looked slightly to the right, into the next column . . . A-L-Y-S-S-E F-O-S-T-E-R.

I DID IT!

For the first time in my life I had taken a risk and it was worth it. I had gotten a role in my high school's production of "Little Women." Now the real work began.

Practice for "Little Women" was everyday after school, most of the time for three or more hours. Each day as I got on stage the butterflies hatched and fought to escape the clutches of my stomach. Everyday fewer re-hatched as I became more comfortable on stage. Everyday the heartburn-like excitement became a little stronger. By the end of practices, the week of the show, I had steadily become more confident, and I had crafted a character. I made people laugh each day as I recited my memorized lines. I became Aunt March. I was ready for opening night.

Opening night came a lot faster after I had come to that conclusion, maybe a little too fast.

6 p.m. call, Friday night:

A 19th-century bun, pinned tightly to my scalp, altered from my natural blonde to silver with spray on hair color; check.

Heavy foundation, complete with dark lines to accent as wrinkles, gray eyebrows, darker brown eye shadow, and painted lips; check.

On top, one undershirt, covered by a white blouse, underneath a black velvet jacket and a crocheted shawl, clasped in place by an ornamental pin; on the bottom, knee high stockings, two underskirts, a long black formal looking overskirt, underneath it all, black suede high heel boots, and to top it all off, a thin handled wooden cane; check.

Lines: check.

Nausea: check.

“PLACES PLEASE!!!”

I sat backstage for what seemed like days, waiting for my cue. It is often thought that butterflies are friendly insects. Whoever said that was wrong. The butterflies residing in my stomach were vicious, and they were eating me alive!

My palms were sweating; I swear that they were even dripping. My blood pressure was through the roof; I was sure I was going to have a heart attack. My legs were Jell-O; I definitely wouldn't be able to walk. Then finally it came.

“But Meg . . . I . . .”

? . . . Shit.

“What's the front door open for? I don't approve of front doors being left open!”

I walked onto the stage after my first lines, into heat, and bright lights, and, terror. I'm sure everyone could see my bright red face through the three pounds of stage makeup that I had applied not long before. Laughter erupted as I walked onstage; good, they think I'm funny. Wait, there are A LOT of people out there! I can't do this. Meg said something and my mind went blank. My lines were not there; I could not remember them for the life of me. I slowly melted into a puddle of goo on the stage floor, while everyone in that auditorium kept their eyes on me; an eternity passed. I screwed up, forgot my lines, and everyone knew it. I would forever go down in history as the girl who blanked onstage in front of an audience.

But then, Meg continued with her lines and I improvised. My body slowly reformed out of the goo on the floor, and back into Aunt March. From there I nailed it; every line, every emotion was there. The audience laughed and applauded as I exited the stage.

I HAD DONE IT!

When the show ended I went out to greet the audience. People came up to me from all sides and praised how well I had done. According to them I was a hilarious old woman who livened up the show. No one had noticed my complete failure, and no one had seen as I melted into that puddle. I wasn't going down in history as the girl who choked, but as the girl who pulled off a hilarious Aunt March.

I look back on that experience and I remember the theme of "Little Women," overcoming obstacles and hardships to become an individual. In the play, Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy all transformed from young girls into little women. They each worked through hard times and came out on top; they met their enemies and doubters head on. As I worked and struggled for a month, as I overcame my fear of being myself in front of others and triumphed over it, and as I created a new image for myself through my experience, I too became a not-so-little woman.