

## TIME "MARCHES" ON

AMELIA

So, I know you've all read the book before but I hope you got to re-read it. It's my absolute favorite. Don't you just love those books where you feel like you're inside them rather than outside them? That's how I feel about *Little Women* - like I'm living it instead of reading it. I am a little woman of Concord, Massachusetts!

I read *Little Women* for the first time when I was thirteen years old and I knew without a doubt that I would grow up to be Jo March. Doesn't every thirteen-year-old know that without a doubt? Jo March -- brilliant, brash, and ballsy! That was me! Jo's words were my credo. Like Jo says, "I want to be great, or nothing."

JOAN

Jo didn't say that.

AMELIA

What?

JOAN

Jo didn't say that. Amy did.

AMELIA

What are you talking about?

Joan crosses to Amelia and picks up a copy of *Little Women*. She flips through the pages and then reads.

JOAN

(reading)

"Because talent isn't genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won't be a common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more." Amy to Laurie.

AMELIA

Let me see that.

Amelia grabs the book and looks at the quotation.

AMELIA

Shit.

Amelia slams the book down, knocking over a glass picture frame on a side table and smashing it.

AMELIA

Shit, shit, shit. I'm sorry, Carla.

CARLA

It's fine.

AMELIA

But your picture! Who was that?

CARLA

I don't even remember any more.

AMELIA

Let me clean it up.

JOAN

I'll do it, Amelia. You need to calm down.

Joan takes a handkerchief from her purse and cleans up the broken glass. She hands the photo to Carla, who looks at it but doesn't recognize it. Carla puts the photo in a drawer. Joan puts the empty picture frame back on the side table. As Amelia speaks, lights slowly shift to focus only on her.

AMELIA

Calm down? How can I calm down? I thought I knew this book like the back of my hand. I guess I remembered it wrong, but I always thought Jo said that. Jo was the one who wanted to be great. She wanted to be great or nothing, so she became great. That's how it works. If you put your mind to something and don't give up you can achieve it. That's what my mother always told me. That's what I tell my daughter. Don't give up. Don't give up. Don't give up. I've built my whole life around that. I've been married to the same man for twenty-two years.

We have nothing in common and don't even like each other anymore, but I didn't give up. I've been selling cosmetics since I was twenty-five, trying to earn that pink Cadillac, and I don't even like to wear makeup, but I didn't give up. I've been renovating our house for ten years so I can get a photo spread in *Better Homes & Gardens*. When I was told I had termites, did I give up? NO! All because of Jo March. All because she was determined to be great or nothing. And now I find out . . . I find out . . .

Amelia sits. She is inconsolable.

AMELIA

My whole life has been a façade.

Joan enters the light.

JOAN

I wouldn't go that far.

AMELIA

(wailing)

I'm an Amy. Oh, God. I'm an Amy.

JOAN

What's wrong with that?

AMELIA

Amy's a brat. An opportunist. A dilatant. If I were a Meg it wouldn't be so bad. She gets married to a man who really loves her and has twins. Even Beth would be better. Everybody loves Beth, and she gets to die tragically of scarlet fever. But Amy? Amy's a hack artist who steals her sister's trip to Europe by sucking up to their bitch aunt and then seduces Jo's man.

JOAN

Amy March is the most realistic, self-assured, confident female character of nineteenth-century literature. You could do a lot worse than to model your life after hers.

AMELIA

She's a twit.

JOAN

She's a twit who gets everything she ever wants.

AMELIA

She doesn't get to be great.

JOAN

What she gets is better. She gets to be happy. I'm so tired of people who think that the only way to have a good life is to be exceptional. It's such an adolescent notion. The world is full of grown-up people perfectly content to live with their ordinary spouses and sell cosmetics and fix up their houses without having candlelight dinners and pink Cadillacs and magazine spreads. What's wrong with being ordinary?

AMELIA

Everything.

Pause.

JOAN

Sometimes I think that books are bad for us.

The women react.

JOAN

Really. They give us these characters to look up to and emulate, but we can never measure up, but we keep trying, knowing that we'll fail. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. I tell my kids that it's okay to be normal, to be ordinary, to be small. Even a small life can have meaning.

Joan picks up the copy of *Little Women*.

JOAN

That's really what this book is about. Meg giving up her silk to buy her husband a coat. Beth feeding the poor Hummel family. Jo building a school for orphaned boys. Even Amy, tending to her frail daughter. It's the little moments of the little women that give their lives meaning.

AMELIA

But I want to be great! I've always wanted to be great. I want people to see me driving my pink Cadillac with my husband in the seat next to me as we pull in to our *Better Homes & Gardens* house. I want people to say, "There goes, Amelia. She's so lucky. She has everything." Otherwise, it's just, "There goes, Amelia. She's still driving that old Kia Spectra and yelling at her husband as they pull into their termite-infested ranch house with the crumbling walls."

JOAN

Aspirations are fine, but why are we so hard on ourselves and each other when we come up short?

AMELIA

Because I want to be great or nothing! . . . Oh, God. I really am an Amy! Hide your plane tickets to Europe, girls! Lock up your husbands. Who knows what I'll do!

JOAN

Amelia, calm down. I don't think that's what Amy meant. I think she's breaking the myth. She's saying that if she can't be great, she'll choose happiness. I mean what's wrong with living a little life?

Joan looks at the other women. Lights shift to  
focus only on Joan

## HOW TO SET THE TABLE: BEING A TREATISE UPON THIS IMPORTANT SUBJECT AS DELIVERED TO THE BOOK CLUB

JOAN

What's wrong with living a little life? Really, I want to know. Why do we feel like failures if we don't discover a cure for cancer or make a killing on the market or write the great American novel? Why do we all want to be Jo March instead of Amy? Scarlett O'Hara instead of Melanie Hamilton? Nancy Drew instead of her pudgy cousin Bess or her boyish cousin George? I read *Little Women*, *Gone With the Wind*, and all the Nancy Drew's. And you know how they made me feel? Like a loser. I couldn't write books or solve crimes or fight off the damn Yankees.

You know, Carla, when you invited me to book club I almost said no. Not because I don't like to read, but because I knew what we'd be reading. All those books that make me feel less than. It's like losing my self-esteem over and over again. I didn't think I'd have anything to offer.

But then I thought maybe this was my chance, you know to prove that even though I'm not a best-selling author with a magnifying glass in one hand and a Remington rifle in the other I'm not a loser. And I love books. Probably not the same books you love, but I do.

Pause. Then a confession.

You know where I spend my time in the library?

Pause.

In the TX's.

Pause.

The cookbooks. I love cookbooks. I know they're not Thackeray, Tolstoy, or Twain, but there are some really good ones.

Joan excitedly takes several small books out of her bag and arranges them carefully on a table.

I wanted to propose one of these for next month. I know they're not fiction, but you didn't say anything about the books having to be fiction, Carla, and these are definitely classics. Cookbooks from the end of the nineteenth century. More than cookbooks really. This one is about how to set the table. And this one is how to use a chafing dish. All by Sarah Tyson Heston Rorer. Isn't that a great name? Sarah Tyson Heston Rorer. She was a domestic science pioneer. Her cookbooks changed my life. No, that's an overstatement and I don't believe in overstatements. Her cookbooks changed my perspective on my life. And that's why I brought them to book club. We're here to get new perspectives, right? Isn't that what you said, Carla?

Carla cautiously nods her head.

Well, Mrs. Rorer agrees. This is from her book *Make-over Dishes*.

Joan picks up her copy of *Make-over Dishes* and reads.

(reading)

"The object of cooking is to draw out the proper flavor of each individual ingredient used in the preparation of a dish, and render it more easy of digestion."

Wouldn't you agree, Carla?

Carla looks confused.

And Amelia -

Amelia looks suspiciously at Joan.

You want to add some variety to your life, right? Make things a little more special.

Amelia smiles cautiously.

Well, as Mrs. Rorer says in her classic book *Sandwiches*,

Joan picks up her copy of *Sandwiches* and reads.

(reading)

“Sandwiches are principally used for buffet lunches or evening sociables, where only a light, substantial lunch is required. In these days they are made in great varieties. Almost all sorts of meat, if properly seasoned, may be made into delicious sandwiches.” Food for thought, right, Amelia?

Amelia looks around to see if anyone understands what Joan is saying

And Naomi.

Naomi looks pissed.

I give to you the words of Sarah Tyson Heston Rorer from *Many Ways for Cooking Eggs*.

Joan picks up her copy of *Many Way for Cooking Eggs* and reads.

(reading)

“The philosophy of a sauce, when understood, enables even an untrained cook to make a great variety of every day sauces from materials usually found in every household.”

NAOMI

What the fuck?

All the women look at Joan in various stages of confusion.

JOAN

All I'm saying is let's learn from Mrs. Rorer's Domestic Lessons as outlined in the chapters of her *Good Cooking* book.

Joan picks up a copy of *Good Cooking* and opens to the table of contents.

(reading)

The Right Food for Different Men  
 The Best Foods for Stout and Thin Women  
 The Best Food for Bloodless Girls  
 The Proper Cooking for the Nursery  
 The Best Food for a Growing Child  
 Cooking for the Sick and Convalescent

There's different food for different people. There are different books for different people. There are different lives for different people. And that's okay. Mrs. Rorer helped me figure that out. Eventually. I admit it took a while. I was always the girl who was different. My older sister Marjorie wanted to be an actress and then a princess like Grace Kelly. My younger sister Penny wanted to be a large animal vet and live in Africa. I just wanted to play with my Easy-Bake oven. They used to tease me. "Joannie's happy with nothing but a cup of flour and a lightbulb." I laughed, but the truth is they always made me feel, oh, I don't know, like I didn't have anything to offer, I guess. Like I brought nothing to the table. Like I was losing out on something because I didn't have bigger dreams. But when I discovered Mrs. Rorer, it was like I found something. Here was a woman who had made a big life out of something that most people considered small. She helped me see that there's nothing wrong with living a little life as long as it's a little life that makes you happy. It took me a while to figure this out, but it's served me well.

Lights expand to include Amelia.

AMELIA

But it just seems so . . . small. I mean, why be a paring knife when you can be a meat cleaver?

JOAN

Bigger is not always better.

AMELIA

It's not always worse either.



JOAN

I think it's about the right knife for the right job.

AMELIA

Like how Amy was actually better with Laurie than Jo?

JOAN

And Jo was better with Professor Bhaer.

AMELIA

So, maybe I'm not meant to live a big life.

JOAN

You're meant to live your life.

AMELIA

I guess you're right. I guess everybody brings something different to the table.

Sound of a dinner gong. Lights down.