

## Chapter Two

Leaves of Grass . . . is too frequently reckless and indecent. . . . His words might have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise, before the want of fig-leaves brought no shame; but they are quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society.

—CHARLES A. DANA,  
*New York Daily Tribune*,  
July 23, 1855

Bronson balanced his weight on one knee and patted the soil into place around the delicate sprout of a pumpkin vine, newly emerged from the ground just that morning. It had been ten days since he drew up his plan for the garden, and he was pleased to see the plants taking root. He chose not to dwell on the fact that it was nearly August; this vine would not produce fruit until at least November, assuming there was no frost before then. No matter—he felt a provider’s pride. He was making food for his family out of a few seeds and a patch of earth.

Louisa stood nearby, hanging laundry on the line. Tuesday mornings they washed the linens, and she’d volunteered for the chore of

hanging the wet laundry out of sheer self-preservation. She felt if she did not get out of the washroom, away from the bubbling vat of soap, she might pick up a chair and hurl it across the room. She didn't trust herself to keep her temper. It seemed she was getting less patient, less able to accept her duties, despite the fact that she wanted desperately to be good. All her life she had observed Anna as a scientist observes the object of his experiment; she watched for patterns that might reveal how Anna was able to move through life with ease while Louisa trailed behind her in fits and starts. But Louisa couldn't seem to discern Anna's secrets. She doubted Anna herself understood them.

And now Anna wanted to get *married*. How she could come to that conclusion after watching their mother suffer all these years was baffling to Louisa. Abba's entire adult life was one test of endurance after another. She'd birthed five children, one too early to survive, and had the misfortune of a husband who floated through the world, his feet rarely touching the ground. When she fell in love with Bronson and his ideas, she knew his philosophy and teaching would not provide the means for a life full of fine things. It mattered not to her—dresses and fine furniture were dull compared to Plato and Shakespeare. But Abba had underestimated just how little he thought of practical things, like how they might pay for a place to live, or how they would raise healthy children on a diet of vegetables and bread alone. Abba tried for her daughters' sakes to bear up, but the strain showed. Louisa had decided from an early age that she wanted her life to be nothing like her mother's.

Bronson stood up and arched his back, his eyes closed a moment to the glare of the sun. He glanced over at Louisa as she stretched to pin a sheet on the line. "You make a lovely tableau, my daughter."

Louisa noticed a bit of dirt trapped in the cloud of his wiry sideburn and smiled, feeling her heart swell in response to this rare bit of

praise. No matter what she wanted to achieve, who she wanted to be, it was her father's love and approval she wanted more than anything else in the world.

"Ho, Alcott!"

Father and daughter looked up to see the familiar gait of their Concord neighbor Mr. Emerson as he moved up the path, clutching a large glass jar between his elbow and ribs.

Bronson stepped forward to shake his hand. "Hello, my friend. I knew this promised to be a pleasant day."

Emerson smiled, the deep creases in the outer corners of his eyes stretching to his temples. "I've come to see how you're settling in." He held out the jar. "Lemon preserves for your wife, with best wishes from Mrs. Emerson. Good morning, Miss Louisa," he said, tipping his hat in her direction.

"Good morning," she replied, her voice barely louder than a whisper. Mr. Emerson was sober and polite to most, but the Alcotts awakened a joviality in him. When Louisa was fourteen, he patiently read her writing and offered encouraging words. The attention astonished her and she began to wrestle with the question that would trouble her all her life: Why would God give a woman talent if he meant her to be confined to the kitchen and washtub? Though to her father he was simply Waldo, Louisa never forgot she was in the presence of a great man and couldn't help but be self-conscious around him. Bronson placed his hand on Emerson's shoulder and turned him toward the house.

"Let's go inside to talk." Bronson pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and used it to mop his face. "Perhaps Louisa will be kind enough to get us something cool to drink."

Bronson and Emerson retired to the parlor and Louisa turned toward the kitchen carrying the preserves. Abba stood at the sink, her

knife poised above a half-peeled potato. A mountain of the knobby root vegetables and a large cabbage that looked to be half rotten lay heaped at her elbow. She gazed out the window toward the woods at the edge of the garden. Louisa looked out in the same direction to see what had captured her mother's attention, but nothing was there. She reached for the metal pitcher that hung on a rusty hook above where Abba worked.

Abba's knife clattered to the floor. "God in *heaven*—you startled me!"

Louisa touched her mother's arm. "I'm sorry, Marmee. You looked lost in thought—I didn't want to interrupt you."

Abba blinked at her daughter, as if she knew she should recognize her but didn't. Then the vacant expression disappeared and Abba stooped to pick up the knife. "Did you finish hanging the laundry?"

"Yes. Father was working in the garden and Mr. Emerson has come. He brought you some of Mrs. Emerson's preserves." Louisa placed the jar on the worktable. "I was going to take them something to drink in the parlor."

Abba already had turned back to the sink and was digging a black spot out of a potato with the tip of the blade. Louisa observed Abba's stooped posture and the silver streaks in her hair. Abba spoke over her shoulder. "It's nearly eleven. Perhaps they would like something to eat as well."

Louisa brought the pitcher of water into the parlor a few moments later, along with half a loaf of brown bread and some butter from the larder, and placed the tray on the low table between the sofa and arm-chairs that faced the hearth. Behind the sofa was a narrow shelf with two chairs and Louisa slipped into one, quietly taking up a stocking from the mending basket and hoping for a chance to listen to the men

talk without being noticed by them or by Abba, who would likely find a chore for Louisa to do.

“Well, my friend, how do you find Walpole so far?” Emerson’s face was dominated by his Roman nose and prominent brow. “Have you gone much into town?”

“I have stopped in at the village store but haven’t spent much time there,” Bronson said. “In general I find the men here have a tendency to pontificate endlessly.”

Louisa bit her bottom lip and jabbed the needle into the toe seam to stifle a giggle.

She could see the irony of the comment did not escape Emerson either, but he continued kindly. “What have you been reading lately? I have something intriguing that I think you’ll quite enjoy.”

“All my old texts—*Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Aids to Reflection*, Plato. You know how I feel that one must read the same works again and again to truly extract the meaning. But let no one say Alcott’s mind is closed to the new.”

Emerson grinned at the proclamation. Bronson fancied himself a grand man, and though his lofty way of speaking endeared him to Emerson, it sometimes earned him ridicule from others.

“This appeared just a few weeks ago, out of the ether.” Emerson pulled a volume the size of a prayer book from his jacket pocket. The book was bound in green cloth with gold-stamped type on the front cover and spine, and Louisa strained to see the title. “The poet calls it *Leaves of Grass*. And—you will not believe this when I tell you—his name is nowhere to be found on the cover.”

Bronson’s eyes widened. “He doesn’t identify himself?” To two men quite enamored of the sight of their own names in print, the news was shocking.

"None. Only this." Emerson opened to the frontispiece. "A daguerreotype of the poet. Dressed like a scoundrel, I might add."

He handed the book to Bronson, who flipped slowly through its pages. "And what is the nature of the verse?"

"It is the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom an American has ever contributed."

Bronson, who knew his friend was not prone to exaggeration, raised his eyebrows.

"His words and form are *transcendental* in every meaning of the word. There's nothing else like it I've ever seen."

Louisa realized she had been holding her breath. The hole in the much-darned stocking remained, the needle pinched between her index finger and thumb. She had never heard Mr. Emerson talk this way before. He sat on the edge of his chair, his typically sober demeanor alive with excitement.

"You will find, I think . . ." Emerson hesitated. ". . . that his subject matter is . . . peculiar. A bit shocking." He gave a quick glance in Louisa's direction. "And certainly not meant for the eyes of our counterparts." Louisa realized glumly that he'd been aware of her presence all along. "In any case, they wouldn't be able to make much sense of it, I don't think. This is the poet of the man, the American man, and the meaning and responsibilities of his radical freedom."

Bronson turned the volume in his hands. "And you know nothing of his identity?"

"Aha." Emerson raised an index finger. "I did not, until a few nights ago. I saw an advertisement with a picture of the book, and beneath that, for the first time, the poet's name. Mr. Walt Whitman, of Brooklyn, New York. You must read it as soon as you can, my friend. I am anxious to hear your thoughts on his work."

"I will begin it as soon as we part. Your recommendation is enough

to convince me.” Bronson smeared butter on a slice of bread he’d been eyeing throughout the conversation. “And your own work—does it go well?”

Emerson nodded. “I am finishing a volume of essays on my visits to England.” He pulled his watch from his waist pocket and squinted at it. “In fact, I should be on my way now. It is nearly afternoon.”

The men rose. Bronson walked his friend to the front door and shook his hand. Emerson nodded to Louisa and asked Bronson to wish Mrs. Alcott well. When Bronson turned back, his eyes registered Louisa’s presence, but he took no notice of her. His mind was far away on something else. He reached for the strange volume of poetry Emerson had been so eager to show him and turned toward his study.

Louisa set down her mending and followed him. “Father?”

Bronson turned, startled. “Yes, child?”

She had to think quickly now. “Do you think . . . do you think Mr. Emerson will be thought of in the future as a philosopher? The way we think of Plato now?” She hadn’t actually meant to ask that, but now that the question was out, she did want to know the answer. Just as she’d hoped, he began walking slowly toward his study. She walked alongside, her hands clasped in front of her.

He thought a moment before he spoke. “There is no question that Emerson’s mind knows no equal. But he is too interested in fame and scholarship, not enough in the divine.” Bronson squared his shoulders, forever at the podium. “He sees all but doesn’t always feel. Do you understand my meaning? He has a capital intellect but an undeveloped soul.”

Louisa nodded, surprised to hear her father speak so critically. They reached his study and he walked around to his desk, pulling out the chair and settling in to shuffle through the disorganized stacks of

papers. His face glowed in the light of the green-shaded brass lamp on the corner of his desk. He laid the mysterious volume of poetry off to the side and placed his journal on top of it, then looked up, surprised to see Louisa still standing in the room.

As he opened his mouth to speak, they both turned toward soft footfalls in the hallway. Lizzie appeared at the door holding a small tray that held a tarnished coffeepot. She entered the room behind Louisa and placed the tray on a table under the window, then turned to Bronson. "Father, I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation."

"No need to apologize, little bird. What is it?"

Louisa wondered at her sister's ethereal appearance, the dove-gray cotton of her dress doing nothing to enliven her pale complexion and light hair. She seemed at times like a slender ghost who fluttered from room to room, enamored with the textures of domesticity: the smooth bone of the knitting needle, the snap and flutter of a sheet in the breeze. They called her their little bird, little housewife, though Lizzie brushed off this praise.

"Marmee says there's a family on River Road that has the scarlet fever?"

Bronson nodded. "Yes, I believe I heard something about that in town just yesterday."

Lizzie reached into the right pocket of her apron and pulled out a handful of coins. A bulge in the left pocket squirmed and two orange ears poked out.

Louisa giggled, pointing at the kitten. "I see you've already taken on a new charge," she whispered. The sisters had long joked that stray kittens throughout the northeast flocked to Lizzie, knowing she wouldn't refuse them. Once, in Concord, Bronson finally put his foot down and ordered them out of the house when he found a whole litter scattered in the spaces on his bookshelf. Louisa had

helped Lizzie hide them under the bed until he forgot about his prohibition.

Lizzie smiled, putting her finger to her lips. Bronson was flipping through a hefty book and failed to notice the feline interloper. Lizzie pushed the fuzzy head back into her pocket and held out the money. “Father, I’d like to send this to them, and I have some brown bread cooling. Marmee says they have no flour.”

He looked up. “This is a kind gesture, Elizabeth, and it gives me pride to see it.”

She smiled. “It wouldn’t be right *not* to give, when we can.” Louisa felt humbled by her sister’s generosity, though she wondered about whether they truly had anything to spare. Lizzie floated out into the hallway but then turned back. Bronson sighed impatiently.

“Will you be going into town today?” she asked.

“Yes,” Bronson said with a little irritation. “Just as soon as I have a moment to complete this letter. I will deliver your gifts then.”

Lizzie nodded. “Thank you, Father.”

Bronson turned back to Louisa, who stood waiting patiently to reclaim the thread of their conversation. “And now to you. Did I answer your question about Mr. Emerson well, my child? It is time for me to work.”

“Yes, Father. Very well.” Louisa marked the place on the desk where Whitman’s book lay concealed, already calculating the hours until her father’s evening constitutional when the study would be empty and she might slip in and claim it. “Very well indeed.”

*That evening*, Louisa climbed wearily up the steps under the strain of a feigned headache and waited until she was safely ensconced in the attic room before liberating the book from the waistband of

her dress. She settled upon the sagging bed and leaned back against the wall, feeling her chignon press against the faded wallpaper.

The book felt smaller than she'd expected after dreaming about it all afternoon. She stared at the frontispiece image of the poet. He did indeed look like a scoundrel, with his hat tipped to the side and a rumpled shirt, open at the collar. He reminded her of the vagrants she'd seen lurking in Boston Common when she crossed the park on walks with her father. All the poets she'd ever seen had gray hair, wore neat, if not new, frock coats and top hats, and took their tea in parlors. Whitman looked like the sort who might tear across a parlor like a maniac, frightening the ladies and overturning all the furniture. She thought back to Mr. Emerson's warning that the book was not meant for a woman's eyes, though she didn't for a second consider retreating from her investigations.

And then she turned past the introduction to the opening verse.

*I celebrate myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

She turned the pages and a glowing candle on the table beside the bed sank into its pricket. The verse was at once crude and reverent, panoramic and microscopic. With a kinetic rhythm, the poet wrote of an America Louisa scarcely knew, of bodies at work, sweating, cursing, praying; of slaves; of lovers; of buds folded in the earth. Line by line, the words lapped at her like waves crawling the shore. When she finally slept she dreamed of train whistles and the rhythmic clang of a blacksmith's hammer, her hand clutched as if it held a pen.