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A Case of Growing Up

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Author Bio

Alison McCabe is enjoying her junior year at Gettysburg College. She is a Psychology major and Creative Writing minor who hopes to one day fight crime as an investigator or top secret agent, and then come home from a long days work every night to write and unwind and go to bed and have sweet dreams about her work getting published.

The lone whistle cries for things left unsaid,
The world is asleep, yet awake she remains.

"But life's like the moon as it waxes and wanes,
It keeps going 'round, so live 'til you're dead."
No need to be up with your thoughts and the trains.

And as these words resound, those crippling stains
Of regret leave her mind and to dreams she is led.
The world no longer sleeps while awake she remains,
Alone with her thoughts and the sounds of the trains.

ALISON MCCABE

A Case of Growing Up

I always preferred when it was just Mom and me for long car rides so I could sit in the front seat and pick the radio stations and rest my arm out the window. It was the way an air of contentment would fly in with the cross breeze and coast into our ears, our heads, our carefree contemplation, that I liked best. Mom was upset that Dad and Shawn had left for a cross country camping trip the week before and could not make it back for the day. I was pleased that it would only be me and Mom going.

This day I was especially excited because it would be my first time attending a funeral. I was still young, not so young, but young enough to have seen only life and no death. Yet at twelve years old, I knew enough to hide my enthusiasm with a solemn disposition because, naturally, funerals are understood to be mostly somber occasions. So as Mom ironed my black blouse in the other room, I stood in front of the mirror and practiced my mournful disguise. Lipstick would make my pout look fuller, but Mom had said I shouldn't rush those grown-up things. I figured today wasn't the day to bring up the makeup issue again, so I adjusted my lower lip to accentuate, but not overdo, the desired effect. I was a Hollywood star perfecting my funeral face for my next feature film before the limo arrived. The real life sorrow was all so glamorous. Death was the type of drama everyone would care about. At school all I would have to say was that my favorite aunt just died and they'd all talk about me and how sorry they felt and I would instantly be the topic of lunchtime conversation. I'd act a mess, and my day would drip with sweet sympathy. Maybe even the boys would give me hugs as I'd force a tear onto their bony little shoulders. Imagine that, me having actually found a way into their arms.

That morning, I focused most on Tommy Boyd. Tommy wore basketball shorts, a slightly oversized t-shirt, a baseball hat, but never a jacket to school each day, even in December. His hat covered his face from mid-nose up, so I hadn't seen his eyes, but I imagined that they were bright, blue, and dreamy. My friend Amy said

he must have liked me because he would always get me to look the other way at lunch so he could steal one or two of my Oreos. I didn't find her logic too convincing, but I hoped that she was right.

Every morning for the past three weeks, I brushed my hair and practiced my smile for Tommy Boyd. The morning of the funeral I practiced my pout. As I stared at my reflection to keep from blinking, to keep my eyelids from washing away the water that built up inside them, I ran through the scenario of school the next day in my head. When it hurt too much, I relaxed my lids, blinked, and let a tear trickle down along the curve of my nose, settling around the edge of my upper lip. I concluded that, if my performance was sorrowful and convincing enough, I would most definitely end up in his arms.

Really, I was much too old to not yet have a grasp on death. By middle school it's pretty much understood to be an already experienced experience. Whether it is by loss of a grandparent or goldfish, most kids have been through it and felt the effects. I hadn't. Half of my grandparents were out of the picture by the time I was born, and when the third one left us, I was too young to cry over anything more than a bumped head or a bottle. My aunt's death was the first I could really remember.

My mom finished the ironing and I could hear her footsteps come down the hall and then the click and scrape of the door knob.

"Why do you always lock it?" Mom's words were heavy and impatient.

"Sorry. Habit." Privacy, please, mother.

"I told you not to."

"Sorry." I'm old enough for privacy. And makeup, but I won't push it.

"Get ready, we have to go."

Yes, yes we have to go. The stage is set, the limo has arrived. The star has adjusted her last button and the costume is set. The supporting actress has initiated a conflict – over a bedroom door, but the drama will build rest assured – and the tension is set. Everything is set. And action.

Mom kept the windows up. It wasn't even raining, but I didn't argue because I figured the wind would only mess up my hair so it was actually better that way. Inside the car was hot and I was sweating and my back settled in a sticky position against the passenger seat. It was a good thing I was wearing black. The ride was uncomfortably stuffy, and I would have welcomed rain. Funerals are best with a rainy day backdrop. Mom was too focused, or maybe too much in a daze, to notice the heat. She was always the one who made the executive decisions about the AC, so the stifling air stayed put. The radio cut the silence that Mom and I had preserved. I didn't talk because I was afraid that anything I would say might bring Mom to tears. Her eyes were already glassy.

I didn't recognize most of the faces at the funeral. I almost didn't recognize the faces that should have been familiar to me because their eyelids were so swollen, their cheeks were so red, and their lips were clenched together so tightly. They were the faces I had never seen without a smile. Now they looked like saddened babies the way their features puffed out, all raw, pink, and sticky. But it wasn't anything cute, there wasn't any Hollywood glamour in it.

Aaron and Justin were at the front of the room by their mother's casket. It was the first time I had ever seen Justin in something other than ripped blue jeans and an oversized hoodie, and I thought how his black pants and collared shirt must

have just added to the discomfort of the day. Justin turned towards the back of the room where Mom and I were standing. He looked at me and – I wanted to tell him he didn't have to, that I didn't need him to be cheery today of all days – he smiled. For me, the young one, he needed to smile. Seven years between us and he stood beside his dead mother. Tragic, he hadn't even left his teens and already he'd have to be the grown-up. My uncle didn't cook, didn't clean, didn't do much but work. Aaron would fly back to school for finals in a week or two. Justin would have to learn to cook, learn to clean, and grow up on his own. So tragic. I'd be sure to tell them all about Justin and his sad, sad situation at school.

I smiled back, wondering how long such a cheery expression should be held in such a somber atmosphere. Two seconds, I decided, and then my award-winning face of sympathy. But then something occurred to me and a look of puzzling nausea choked my planned pose. I thought again of Justin and then of myself in seven years and my own mom maybe dead. The parallel, as unlikely as it was, seemed all too possible. I wondered if I would be able to smile beside her casket as Justin had, as a grown-up would for the young one. Mom maybe dead, Mom maybe dead. And the thought bit at my gut and my thespian exterior. I struggled with a heavy swallow. Then my stomach sank and I had to sit down so my insides wouldn't drag my knees to the floor. Mom walked over to Aaron and Justin and my aunt in her casket.

I sat in the back of the room and wondered if that was the appropriate place for the niece of the deceased to sit. The important people were up front, that was clear. They were the ones that knew her best; every good part of her and even the worst parts of her that pretty much killed her. They were the co-workers, lifelong friends, therapists, counselors, acquaintances she'd decided to confide in. But I wasn't sure how important I was and if it was expected that I should look into the casket. I didn't want to. I could see her picture in front of the flower display, her smile so real and her eyes alive, and I was sure that her face couldn't possibly look so good now. I didn't want to look into her stiff, departed expression. Another thing, a confession; I worried what it might do to me, seeing her sound asleep in that finely crafted oblong box. I might have cried and I didn't know if crying was an appropriate thing for me to do at the occasion. I hadn't planned for this, and couldn't calculate how upset I was supposed to be. So I stayed seated in the back of the room.

Others were crying, but they were old enough to cry. I thought that mascara was a mistake for this day because all it did was run down the women's pale, sorrowful cheeks. Mom had a tissue, fully saturated into a wadded ball, and she kept dabbing at her eyes with it. I wanted to tell her that she was only smearing the gray streaks, but I was still afraid to talk to her. Not when she was so fragile. Sure, it might have upset the drama for the scene, but it wouldn't have been right.

On the car ride to the cemetery, I thought about my aunt when she was living. It occurred to me that she had been a big part of my life. It also occurred to me that she was now gone. I hadn't had a sense of this before, not earlier that morning as I had carefully prepped a mask for my excitement over the day's events, or even the evening at dinner when Mom had told me the news.

"You know about Aunt Shirley being sick." I knew it was serious because Mom had put her fork down with mashed potatoes still on her plate.

"Something with the liver, Dad says."

That was right, Mom had said, it was a problem with the liver. She had

been sick for a long time and it wasn't the kind the doctors could make better. I didn't understand but I nodded because it felt like this was a very grown-up conversation for us to be having and so I wanted to act like a grown-up would. When Mom told me that my aunt had passed away, I gave the best grown-up response I could.

"I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

Mom's eyes were glassy and wide and gazing right into mine. Unnerving, I thought, but dramatic. I had never seen a look like that from her before. I wondered how my own look compared to hers. I hoped my expression was mature and appropriate. She said she would be fine as she brought her plate to the sink.

"Just no appetite." But brisket and mashed potatoes were a family favorite.

"Me neither," I said, as I shoveled as many heaping spoonfuls as I could fit into my mouth before she turned back towards the table.

That evening I hadn't taken much time to consider what my life might be like without my aunt in it but, in the stuffy car on the way to the cemetery, it was all that was on my mind. I turned up the radio in an attempt to drown out my thoughts, but I couldn't manage to cling to the lyrics or melody over my own reflections. I rolled down the front windows half way on both sides to initiate a cross breeze that might carry my memories out of my head and into the afternoon air. But my hair rushed around my face, and I all could do was remember. I mostly remembered Christmas.

I was seven and watching the holiday lights blur by through the car's back-seat window. Mom, my aunt, and I were out doing some last minute shopping, for me mostly. My aunt always let me pick out my own gifts, and she would buy me all the things that Mom said were too much. I had a dollhouse that year, and wanted all the furnishings to go with it. Mom said to ask for either the kitchen or bedroom set, but both were under the tree at my aunt's house Christmas morning.

Christmas Eve a year later, my aunt came home with thirty nine votive candles. Cinnamon Sticks, Cucumber Mint, Fresh Laundry, Cedar, Lavender Dreams, Pumpkin, Morning Coffee, Lemon Squeeze, Frosty Pine, Autumn Apple, Sour Apple, Country Apple, and Apple Pie. Three of each fragrance. It was a bit much, but she defended herself with irrational rationalizations. It was an excuse she'd often use. They were on sale and she couldn't decide which ones she liked best.

I loved when my aunt went to excess. It meant more gifts on Christmas, Birthdays, or Just-because days in between. More cakes for family holidays when my aunt was put in charge of desserts. More hugs, more kisses, more laughs and lighthearted optimism than could be expected from any other grown-up I knew. I loved my aunt for it. But Mom only wished it would stop. The grown-ups would nag her about her overspending, remind her that she still needed to get Aaron through the rest of college and start Justin on his way. It made Mom worry.

There was always alcohol at my aunt's house on Christmas because she needed it. The only time alcohol was at any of my family gatherings was when my aunt was there. With everyone else either recovering from alcoholism or trying to avoid the family trend altogether, liquor was usually locked up. I'd heard about the trend and those who started but couldn't stop, Dad liked to remind me – Let it be a lesson – though I had to trust his word because I just didn't see it. To me, the problem didn't exist. To me, my aunt had no problem. Every time I'd seen her she'd had a gift for me and a story to make Mom and Dad laugh. Nothing wrong with that. I liked the familiarity of her breath and how it always smelled like the nail polish

remover Mom had used to take the pink sparkles off my toes. And Mom and Dad never said there was a problem, so I suspected that she simply had a taste for vodka when it would show up at her house every year. I wasn't aware that exceptions were being made, that the grown-ups had silently agreed to leave liquor around because my aunt was pretty intolerable without it. I had never seen her fully sober, though I had never known it when she was even slightly drunk. I didn't know she had a problem. I didn't know it at seven, or even at twelve as I watched them lower her casket into the dark, dry ground. A shame, the untimely death of an alcoholic surely would have added to the dramatic intrigue of the event, though at this point I had had enough of the drama.

I wish I could recall the point at which I understood that alcohol had killed her, but I only draw blanks. The realization was more or less a piecing together of retrospection that somehow eventually fit into my consciousness. If I had understood it then, I'd like to think I wouldn't have practiced my pretend pout in front of the mirror the morning she was put underground.

My aunt missed Christmas when I was eleven because she just wasn't up for it. That's what Mom had said. Aaron and Justin came, but they didn't laugh so much. My uncle came, but he never laughed so much because, when my aunt had been there before, he had never found her joke to be funny. Still, Justin was all smiles Christmas morning whenever I looked his way. He smiled so I would smile. The lights were up and the train set choo-chooed around the tree, but there weren't as many gifts under it. No alcohol, and that wasn't all that was missing.

Aaron told me a story that year about a Christmas Eve I was too young to remember. My aunt had stood outside on the front lawn with Mom and Dad and Shawn, little me in her arms. Maybe because the story has been told many times, or maybe because I very much wish I could recall it, I can imagine the night now as if I had always had the memory for it. It was cold, I'm sure, and I would have been bundled up in a sweater, hat, and gloves, maybe also blankets. My aunt would have been laughing over something, making Mom and Dad laugh as she could always do, her boozy breath crisp and almost touchable in the icy evening. Maybe she had patted Shawn on his woolly head, helped him count the stars as I lay on my back, warm against my aunt who was warm with vodka in her veins. I'm sure that I would have liked being in her arms. I had followed Shawn's gaze up into the night sky and raised my tiny, chubby fingers as I pointed to an airplane's lights, one red and some white, passing by. "Santa," I had said. My body would have shaken with my aunt's laughter and I'm sure she would have then leaned over to plant a kiss on my young forehead.

Some years later I found out why I had always seen my aunt so happy, and only happy, and that there was another side to her that the grown-ups had always hidden from the youngest one. Although unexpected, the reality was carelessly tossed out into the open for my taking, sort of nonchalant, like my knowing made no difference. An evening after dinner when Dad was bringing my dollhouse up into the attic: something was said about the furniture and my aunt.

She didn't need to get me all that furniture, though it was awfully nice of her and it certainly made the rooms look good.

"Well, she was manic."

"Manic?"

"Manic. Manic depressive."

He needed to explain it. The excessive buying binges? Manic. Chemical imbalances in the brain. The sudden absences? Depressive. Chemical imbalances in the brain. It seemed an unlikely explanation, but I liked it because that way a bit of my aunt's oddity could be lifted off of her own shoulders and placed onto a classified cause. I'd like to think it would have made a difference had I known this about my aunt when my mom was ironing my black blouse before we threw the dirt onto her grave, that it would have taken Tommy off my mind and the glamour out of the occasion. But it's hard to know really.

As I stood out in the sunshine beside my aunt's grave with Mom, Aaron, Justin and the others whose faces I didn't recognize except for the woe that was in them, my eyes got very confused. The lids were heavy and I looked down to her casket, closed, dead in the ground. And then something did not feel right in them, so I had to look up, towards the sky, where a vision of Santa and his airplane sleigh sabotaged my thoughts. I tried to think of Tommy's arms, but I found myself again held against my aunt's warm chest. Tried to focus on my practiced pout, but the muscles around my mouth held a straight, yet strained position. Tried to rehearse a scenario for school tomorrow, but just couldn't remember my lines. The glamour was gone and I felt sick over it ever having been there. I looked down, stared at the box with my dead aunt inside of it, and fought the sting in my sinuses. My face pressed itself together into a painful knot, and it got to the point where I had to just let it go. It wasn't written in my script, but I cried. My eyes, something did not feel right in them; I couldn't see anything but sorrow.

JOSEPH COOK

Gone to Graveyards

*"Where have all the soldiers gone?
Gone to Graveyards – every one.
When will they ever learn?"*
-Pete Seeger, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

Lost is the legion once led by Caesar,
The phalanx of Alexander the Great.
No more "We about to die salute you."
Farewell to battle, now what is our fate?

Gone the glory of Hector and Achilles,
The brilliant triumph of the towers of Troy.
Farewell to the fame of Hannibal's movement
That brought on the deaths of the bravest of boys.

Who recalls the blind king of Bohemia who
Commanded that he be led to Çrécy's field?
He determined to "...strike one stroke with my sword,"
Said goodbye to his people, tossed aside his shield.
Where are the gentlemen leading great armies
Who fought solely for honor and no other gain?