

# Grown Up

*by May Bulman*

She got a sudden impulse to draw a picture for her mother that afternoon; something she seldom did. The moment reading time ended and Mrs. Edwards dismissed the class from the carpet; Alice selected a pot of colouring pencils and some sugar paper from the stationery shelf, walked over to the far table in the corner of the room and sat down facing the wall. She placed the paper before her and spread the pencils out around it like a rainbow-coloured fan.

The sharp tips of the pencils crumbled a little as she pressed down hard on the page. A deep yellow circle for the sun. The assembly song resonated in her head: The sun has got his hat on, hip hip hip hurray! She thought about the time yesterday when she had sung it to her mother after dinner, and the way her mother had not turned around to look at her, but instead started to vigorously scrub the grease off a frying pan, creating a shrilling sound as the scourer scraped the metal. A sound that shrieked over her song.

A bold layer of green grass soon filled the bottom of the page. Alice used a zigzag pattern to show the different blades, a new technique she had recently discovered. Sharp, green lines sprouted from the grass for the stems, which she had learnt all about when they studied plants in class the week before. She selected two colours for the flowers, one purple and one orange, her mother's favourites.

Tidy-up time began just as Alice was on the last flower. She picked up the drawing and held it at arm's length, picturing how it would look on the fridge or on the notice board at home. She felt sure that it was the prettiest and neatest drawing she had ever made. With a pink pencil, Alice spelt her name out carefully in the top corner, something she had proudly mastered since starting Year One, and delicately placed the picture into her reading folder, so as not to crumple it.

Outside the school, Alice scanned the playground for her little brother's blue pushchair, the way she always did in order to find her mother at home time. She could not see it in the usual area, where Charlotte and Ben's Mums were standing. Where was Mummy? What if she did not find her? Alice struggled to figure out what she would do, for the school would close and the parents would leave and she would have to spend the night in the playground all alone. Perhaps until the morning. She would have no tea, and she would get cold outside in the dark with only her red duffle coat. Alice shivered at the thought.

"Alice". She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up to see Charlotte's mother. "Your Mummy is over there, lovely." Alice turned towards the school gates where she was pointing, and saw her own mother standing with the pushchair. Although relieved, she

could not help also feeling a little angry, for while she had been panicking, her mother hadn't even been looking around for her; she was just staring at the ground. Why had she stood so far away?

As Alice approached the new spot by the school gates she became more annoyed, as her mother continued to stare at the ground. Didn't she care that Alice could be searching for her? It wasn't until Alice was right next to the pushchair that her mother looked up. "Hi darling". She didn't look relieved or even pleased to see Alice. Her face looked strangely bare. She gave a cold sort of smile keeping her mouth closed and only looking at Alice for a second or two with eyes that weren't really looking at her at all. Alice said nothing in response to the greeting, just frowned up at her mother, wanting her to see that she was cross. But she did not notice, for she was already turning the pushchair around to start walking home. How could she be so mean? Alice decided that she would not speak to her at all for the whole walk home, no matter what.

To Alice's surprise, her mother did not say anything as they trudged up the long road home. She did not even ask about her day at school. Alice didn't hold onto the handle of the pushchair as she normally did. She walked as far away from her mother as the narrow pavement would allow. She glared up at her from the side, scrunching up her eyebrows in anger, but no reaction. She was most certainly being ignored, but why?

Sam broke the silence from his pushchair with a loud, long wail. Good. This meant that her mother would have to stop being silent and tend to him. But the pushchair continued to move and Sam wailed again, this time louder. Alice looked up at her mother and saw that her face was blank. She was still staring at the pavement ahead, acting as though she couldn't hear him. "Mummy". Her mother did not respond. Alice's frustration grew. "Mummy, Sam's crying!" Finally, her mother turned to look at her.

"I know, Alice!" her voice was sharp but just a whisper. "We're nearly home". She turned back to the pavement ahead and walked a little faster. Alice noticed just then that her mother's hair was not all tied back neatly as usual, and there were stray strands blowing around her ears. She trailed a few meters behind the pushchair for the rest of the walk home, away from her mean Mummy and her crying baby brother.

When they got home, her mother went directly upstairs to put Sam to bed for his afternoon nap. As Alice advanced through the kitchen alone she remembered the drawing. She did not feel like giving it to her mother anymore. Nevertheless, she slid the picture from her reading folder and placed it in the middle of the kitchen table, not wanting her hard work to go unseen.

She sat down on a kitchen chair and waited for her mother to enter the room. Time passed. She unbuttoned the toggles on her duffle coat, removed it and slung it behind her

on the chair. She reached down to undo the Velcro on her black school shoes and shook them off her feet onto the floor beneath. She cupped her head in her hands and thought about how her mother had treated her differently since she had turned six not long ago, somewhat less caringly. Suddenly a dreadful thought came to Alice. Maybe she had not grown up enough; maybe she was not acting like a six year old. She had certainly felt no change in herself when she became six. Perhaps she was supposed to take action to grow up a little. Perhaps her mother was disappointed that she, her only daughter, was supposed to be six but was still only acting five...

In her sudden state of uneasiness, Alice impulsively decided to do something quite grown up. She stood up from the chair, picked up her coat and walked across the kitchen to the coat hooks. Realising that she was unable to reach, she carefully folded her coat and placed it neatly beneath. She then placed her shoes carefully on the shoe rack by the back door, ensuring that they were the correct way round, bending inwards and not outwards. She put her reading folder on the filing cabinet in the living room and placed her Mickey Mouse lunchbox on the kitchen side. Alice sat back down, pleased with the grown up thing she had just done.

Suddenly Alice felt hungry, for she normally ate a snack as soon as she got in from school. She decided to continue being grown up by sitting and waiting patiently for her mother. While she waited, she peered at her drawing on the table and began to scrutinize it. While it had seemed to look so good earlier, now she could see that the sun she had drawn wasn't really a very circular shape at all. She could see that the flowers were a little too wonky in places. Was this good enough for a six year old, or if it was more like the way a five-year-old would draw? Did her flowers even look like flowers? She peered up towards the vase of roses that stood on the shelf above the kitchen side to compare her drawing to real life.

Only now did she notice that the roses up on the shelf, the ones that her father had given her mother a little while ago, were dying. The flowers that were once so bright and pretty were now drooping downwards, their darkening petals starting to fall off, littering the surface beneath. The leaves that sprouted from the stalks had turned a sickly shade of yellow and becoming all wrinkly. The water that was fresh and clear before was now a murky, thick grey. Why hadn't Mummy or Daddy thrown them away yet? They were even starting to smell funny.

Alice finally heard her mother coming down the stairs. The rhythm of her steps was slower than usual. When she eventually walked into the kitchen, Alice saw that her face was puffy, and that even more strands of her hair had come out of her ponytail, now hanging by her ears. She waited anxiously for her to see the drawing. But her mother did not even notice it. Alice watched her walk slowly across the kitchen towards the fridge, and noticed that she was sniffing as though she had a bad cold all of a sudden. "Would you like a chocolate yoghurt, Alice?" she finally looked at her, speaking in a quiet, muffled tone. Alice nodded her head eagerly. She never got to have a yogurt at this time;

usually her mother would cut up an apple or a banana for her after-school snack. Chocolate yoghurt was only for a special treat.

As her mother took one of the purple yogurt pots from the fridge and slowly peeled off the lid, Alice remembered the dying roses. “Mummy the roses are dying”. She felt grown up as she pointed this out. Her mother looked up at her, and then at the roses on the shelf. She bit her lip, which Alice noticed was cracked and dry, and had no trace of lipstick today, which was strange. She placed the yoghurt pot in front of Alice on the table and peered at the roses once more. She approached them slowly and touched one of the floppy petals, which then floated onto the floor. She stared at the roses for a long time and Alice could see that her eyes were becoming all shiny. She felt sad for her mother because she knew that she loved those roses. When her father gave them to her she had been happy. Alice remembered that was a good day because they all went to the big park and Daddy pushed her on the swing and then she ate white marmite sandwiches with Mummy on the purple rug.

Her mother eventually picked up the vase. Alice got a yucky waft of the rotting smell as she brushed past her chair towards the bin. Her mother tipped out the flowers and then poured the dirty water out into the sink, leaving the empty vase on the kitchen side. She stared at the empty vase for a few moments, before leaving the room in silence.

Alice peered down at the shiny, brown yogurt in front of her. Her mother had forgotten to give her a spoon. This must be because she was now six, and could do these things herself. She slid off the chair and reached up to retrieve a spoon from the top drawer. She returned to sit at the table and dove the spoon into the yogurt, scooping a large mountain of the creamy treat and spooning it into her mouth. It was smooth and sweet and delicious. As she ate, Alice inspected her drawing once again. Surely it was better than anything she’d drawn before. She glanced up at her other pictures on the fridge. One of Ollie the cat, one of her family; the four of them. She tried to remember the last time they were all together like that. Daddy was never there recently.

At that moment, Alice heard the front door open and close, and her father’s footsteps in the corridor. Her tummy fluttered with joy. She couldn’t remember the last time he had returned home from work before bedtime. As she heard him walk through the living room towards the kitchen, she put down her spoon. Alice wondered what he would think about her drawing.

He entered and glanced at Alice, then around the kitchen. “Where’s your Mum?” he asked quickly.

“I don’t know” Alice shrugged and slid her drawing along the table, so that it would be clearly visible for him to see. He stared at Alice anxiously for a moment, without seeing the picture. “I need to speak to her.” Alice studied her father’s distracted face. She gently tapped her fingers on her work of art to make him notice it. “Lovely” he quickly said, but

Alice could see that he hardly looked at the drawing. He was rubbing his face slowly with his hand.

“I think she is upstairs,” Alice said, being helpful like a six-year-old. She heard his big feet going up the staircase.

Alice suddenly felt quite alone, being the only person downstairs. When she finished her chocolate yoghurt, she was careful to descend from the table and place the plastic pot in the bin, and the spoon in the sink. She took her drawing, and crossed the living room. Her feet slid slightly on the floorboards with each step in her thick, red school tights. As she mounted the stairs, Alice held onto the banister with her free hand, before heading along the corridor towards her parents’ bedroom.

The door was ajar, and before entering she peered through the gap. Her mother was sitting on the edge of the bed, bent over with her head in her hands. Her father was standing up by the dressing table looking at the floor, still rubbing his face. “I can’t cope Nick. Knowing what you’ve done. Looking after the kids is so difficult. I can’t cope” her mother said, crying. Alice took a step back. It really was her fault. She felt a prickle in the back of her neck. She had not grown up into a six-year-old properly. She was difficult to look after, and now her Mummy was crying.

Suddenly a faint whimpering came from Sam’s bedroom. Her father glanced towards the door and caught sight of Alice through the gap. “Alice,” he said quickly. “Can you be a big girl and go tend to your brother?” Alice nodded. This was her chance to make things better. To show that she could be a big girl; that she could be grown up. She strode from her parents’ bedroom door to Sam’s room, still clutching her drawing. “Sammy” Alice called gently. As she approached the cot, Sam’s wailing increased. “Sammy, don’t cry”. Alice held her picture up to the railings of his cot. “Look at these pretty colours”. Sam’s big eyes widened as he stared up at the drawing. He stopped wailing, and his mouth curved into a little smile. Sam liked the drawing; Alice felt grown up.

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