

GROWING UP AND LIKING IT

by

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I

The key. There it was in Jo's dictionary under "key." She looked around her nervously. Jo, her sister, four years older, was at volleyball practice. Dad was at work. Only Mom, who was in the kitchen starting dinner, could catch her.

She'd never looked for the key to Jo's "secrets box," but she had often wondered where it was. Now that she'd found it, even though by accident, she felt guilt swelling inside her.

She'd been sitting at the kitchen table, working on a social studies lesson. "Fruits grown in Japan include kumquats . . ." She had no idea what kumquats were.

"If you don't know what the words mean, you can't really understand what you're reading," her fourth grade teacher had said. But when Alison looked for the family dictionary, it wasn't on the shelf where it usually was, so she'd gone to Jo's room to use hers.

She could put the key back. But she had found it by accident and she couldn't pretend she didn't know where it was or what it was for. Alison rarely sought out answers to her questions directly, but she did take advantage of most opportunities that came her way.

She slipped the key into the lock and opened the box. Inside were a silver dollar--their grandfather had given one to each of them--a couple of rings, a baby picture of Jo, a note she had gotten from a boy in second grade.

Jo had written:

I love You. Do You love Me?

_____yes _____No

The boy had checked yes.

Alison was beginning to wonder why Jo kept the box locked when she found on the bottom a booklet called Growing Up and Liking It. She turned to the first page. "You're at an exciting time of life. You're beginning to be interested in boys, you may have started wearing makeup, you're curious about your body."

Alison skipped ahead. "During this time, it is important to bathe daily."

She backed up to a picture. "Female Reproductive Organs," and beside it, "Male Reproductive Organs." She couldn't picture either one as human from the illustrations.

As she read, she learned that somewhere in her stomach were the "pear-shaped" uterus and the fall-open tubes (she sounded it out, assuming they were named as they were because they "fell open" when the egg was released) that bled every month beginning when she was thirteen, meaning she had four years to wait. She was glad about that. Bleeding every month sounded frightening, even if it was just a "slight discharge" as the book said.

"Alison!" her mother called. "What are you doing?"

She quickly put the book back and closed the box. "Looking up a word!" She put the key back in the dictionary and slid it back in its place on Jo's bookshelf.

"Come set the table."

"Coming," she yelled.

Her mother never talked about sex. Sometimes Alison thought her mother never talked about anything of importance. Alison, who was proud of her reading ability and read everything she could, had been at the grocery store with her mother one day and had seen sanitary napkins on the shelf. "Why are those called sanitary, Mom?" she had asked. "Are they cleaner than other napkins?" Her mother had just looked embarrassed.

Now that Alison knew what they were, she felt embarrassed, too, and understood why her mother hadn't said, "Go ask your father," her standard reply for questions she didn't want to answer.

She often forgot things Alison told her as well. If she told her when she got home from school about something she had done that day, unless it had to do with grades, it was as likely as not that five minutes later she would ask what she had done at school that day. She always seemed to be preoccupied with laundry and cooking and shopping and making Alison and Jo do their homework and clean their rooms.

Alison sneaked into Jo's room when she could to read the book. The part about menstruation she more or less understood, but that she had a vagina was a surprise--she had never noticed it.

The book explained that the woman carried an egg and the man a seed and one met the other in sexual intercourse. That the man's penis fit the vagina like "a key in a lock" made sense to her. Alison tried to picture her parents doing what the book said married men and women did. She had a cloudy vision of them holding each other in a brief, mystical union. Then her mother would give her father a small kiss on the lips, the same way she kissed him good-bye in the morning, before they parted. That good-bye kiss was the only time Alison saw her parents touch each other.

Beyond this, she found little else about sex of value in the book because what she most wanted to know, and what it didn't describe, was what intercourse felt like.

At least she didn't think the book described it. Before Alison could finish it, Jo noticed something amiss.

When Jo was angry, Alison pictured her as the boxer down the street who had bitten her on the forehead when she was five. Jo seemed to be all snarls and teeth when she was angry.

Alison's feelings expressed themselves consistently in this way, in brief and singular images, feeling and picture occurring simultaneously so that she couldn't separate one from the other. It didn't seem odd that Jo became a dog's snapping jaws when she was angry. Alison was scarcely aware of its happening. Eventually she became completely conscious of the images, but even when she was much older, after she learned to describe her feelings and call them by name, they would still come to her in these brief images.

Alison usually stayed away from Jo as much as possible. She was a tall thirteen year old, fine-boned and attractive, but she purposely cultivated an air of masculine brashness, wearing her blond hair short, and learning to swear when she was twelve. She was very athletic, and was particularly a fast runner, a talent cultivated by their father, who had played football on his college team.

When the years passed after Alison was born, and no more children came, their father began to watch his daughters for signs of athletic ability. From the time Jo came home from the first grade field day with a blue ribbon in the fifty yard dash, he encouraged her to run.

This contributed to her masculinity. She forced Alison to give her her way by overpowering her with anger, and she was angry often.

When Jo came storming into her room, the box in her hand, jaws snapping, Alison wanted to hide under the bed.

"What've you been doing with my goddam box?"

Alison looked as innocent as she could. "What box?"

"This box." She held it out.

"Nothing."

"Don't you lie to me!"

"How could I do anything to it? It's locked."

"It's all messed up inside. Nobody else would've bothered it."

Alison admitted to herself this was true, but denied it aloud. "I didn't touch it. Go away and leave me alone." She turned her back on Jo and picked up the book she had been reading.

"You stay away from it. You stay out of my room!"

"Who wants in your crummy room anyway!"

Jo slammed the door.

Alison flopped on her bed. She knew Jo didn't believe her. That meant she'd hide the key again and Alison wouldn't get to finish the book.

But, by reading as much as she had, though she didn't realize it yet herself, Alison had decided that as soon as she had the chance, she was going to find out what intercourse felt like.

Nobody in her family ever yelled--except Jo when she got mad at Alison, which Alison tried to avoid most of the time. And once when Alison was younger, she had tried to pull the tablecloth out from under the dishes

on the table, as she had seen somebody do on TV. Her mother had lost her temper and yelled at her for that. Most of the time the family existence was calm and peaceful.

Alison often preferred to be at her best friend Sandy's house. Sandy was the third of six children, a rather pudgy nine year old, who had a habit of running both hands through her short blond hair, especially when she was exasperated by her younger brothers and sister. Alison envied Sandy because she could come and go, as long as she was home for dinner and bedtime, and she never had to account for her time to her parents.

Everyone yelled at her house, including Sandy's parents and Alison-- they had to be heard over the general racket.

Sometimes Alison felt like yelling, especially at Jo, but when she did, she went to her room and screamed into her pillow, because anytime the peace was broken, her father came to investigate and she usually got punished.

Alison thought her father was the wisest and gentlest man in the world. For most of her life she would remember how when she ran to him crying, he would wipe her tears away with his rough thumb, a swipe under each eye, and tell her everything would be all right. It was the most comforting feeling she could imagine. He could be stern when he was angry, but he was always calm and strong.

Each day Mother seemed to look forward to his coming home from work when she would ask, "How was your day?"

It was either "fine" or "miserable." If it had been miserable, they would hear how Mr. Nealy, his boss, was too demanding, or how inadequate Bill, his assistant, was.

Then Mother would say, "Jo won her volleyball game (or track meet) today," or "Alison made an A on her math test."

To which Father would reply, "Good." Then he would read the paper while she got dinner on the table.

After dinner, Mother crocheted or knitted while she and Father watched TV. Alison and Jo did homework. Alison usually had very little and did it quickly, so she would sometimes watch TV with her parents, but usually she read in her room.

When Father heard Jo shouting at Alison about the box, he came to Alison's room. His glasses were pushed up on his balding head the way they always were when he came to settle a dispute.

"What's going on?"

"Jo says I got in her secrets box."

"Did you?" He spoke calmly and deliberately.

At first, Alison figured that since she had already lied to Jo, she might as well stick to her story. "No," she said.

"Jo, come here please!" he called down the hall.

She came and stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb.

"Alison says she didn't bother your box."

"Then how come it was all messed up?"

Their father looked to Alison.

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Nobody else would touch it."

"Alison, are you sure you didn't bother it?" Her father was looking at her out from under his brows, his face stern.

She looked away and shifted uncomfortably. "I said I didn't open it."

"What did you do?"

"I shook it." She looked up cautiously to see if this lie would work.

"How did you know there wasn't something breakable in there?" Jo shouted.

"Jo, don't yell!"

"She's not supposed to be in my room at all! Make her stay away from my things!"

"Alison you know you're not supposed to go in Jo's room, so stay out of there. And Jo, it wouldn't hurt you to spend some time with your little sister. Maybe then she wouldn't be so curious about your things."

"You always take her side. Do you think telling her to stay out is going to work?" Chaining her in her room wouldn't work!"

"Jo!"

"You're no help at all!" Jo went to her room and shut the door.

Father turned to Alison, frowning. "I want you to stay out of Jo's room, do you understand? She has a right to her privacy."

"O.K. I'm sorry."

He turned to leave.

"Dad?"

"What?" He turned back.

"Why does Jo hate me?"

He sat on the bed and gave her a rare hug. Clinging to him, she could smell his shaving lotion and the starch in his shirt.

"She doesn't hate you, Alison, She's just at an age when she wants to be by herself a lot."

"She's so mean."

"She doesn't mean to be. O.K.?"

Alison couldn't think of anything else to say to keep him there.

"O.K."

He smiled at her as he left the room.

During the summer when Alison was ten, she stayed for a week with Grandma and Grandpa Harvey who lived just three hours away by train. She was excited about going--it was the first trip she had ever made alone--but after two days there, she was bored to death.

Grandma Harvey, her mother's mother, was as absent-minded as Mother herself. She welcomed Alison at the door with a huge hug and she had home-made cookies waiting in the kitchen. After that she seemed to forget Alison, muttering to herself about how much she had to do as she vacuumed, dusted, and scrubbed the house and fixed meals for Grandpa, including lunch, for which he returned to the house from his hardware store a few blocks away.

The first day, Alison explored the attic, finding some old pictures of her mother to giggle over and some furniture and dishes that she played house with for a while. The second day, she watched television all afternoon until she began to feel like a blob of putty with two eyes sitting in the chair.

The third day, while watching Grandma iron in the kitchen, she complained. "Grandma, I don't have anything to do."

"Why don't you go outside and jump rope?"

"It's too hot." Alison knew she was whining, but she couldn't help it. It really was awfully hot. Grandma's face was beginning to drip with perspiration as she ironed.

"I'll tell you what let's do," she finally answered. "We'll go out in the backyard and I'll cool you off with the garden hose. How's that?"

"But I didn't bring my bathing suit."

"Well, you're not going to the beach. Just strip down to your underwear. Nobody's going to see you." She was getting more enthusiastic about her idea.

"I don't have on an undershirt."

"No matter."

Alison's mother had made her stop going bare-chested years before.

"Are you sure it's all right?"

"It's all right. You go get ready," she said, unplugging the iron.

Alison figured a grandmother's word could override a mother's, so she went to the bedroom and stripped to her panties.

At first she felt self-conscious, but as Grandma sprayed her she forgot about it. Then she took the hose and threatened to spray Grandma, who laughed and said she had better not. She sprayed the dogwood tree instead, letting the water shower down on her from the leaves. Then she put her thumb over the mouth of the hose, making a fine spray so that the sun turned it into rainbows.

As she fanned herself with this spray, she became conscious of a tinkering noise nearby, the sound of metal on metal. She looked around and saw the neighbor's son working on his car in the yard next door. He was watching her, but when he saw her looking back, he turned quickly back to the car.

She looked down self-consciously. The water glistened in droplets on her skin and ran in tiny rivers from her wet hair. The rivers ran over

her chest then broke at her nipples, leaving drops clinging to the tip of each. She felt suddenly embarrassed.

"Grandma, I'm done now," she said, throwing down the hose and picking up her towel to wrap around her.

That night she lay in bed re-living her embarrassment. In the comfort of the dark, she cautiously slid her hand up under her pajama top. Her breasts were beginning to protrude, just enough that she could tell a difference. It occurred to her that it was like squeezing a grape to see if the bunch was ripe.

She was glad to get on the train the following Friday. She sat down by the window so she could wave good-bye to Grandma and Grandpa. The train was pulling out and they were beginning to walk away when a woman carrying a paper bag of food sat next to Alison. She opened the bag and began to eat a piece of cheese.

She was a farm woman, with short light reddish brown hair brushed straight back from her forehead in wavy ridges. She wore jeans and boots and a red-checked shirt and leather belt. "Hi," she said to Alison.

"Hi." Alison shifted uncomfortably. Something smelled. She wasn't sure if it was the woman or the cheese, but she thought it would be rude to just move, especially after saying hello. She looked around the car.

A few rows up and on the opposite side was a girl about her age, an empty seat beside her. Alison decided that if she moved there, the woman would just think she wanted to be with someone younger.

"Excuse me," Alison said as she stepped over the woman's boots. The other girl looked up as Alison sat down. "Hi," Alison said. "Do you mind

if I sit here?"

"No." She was sitting very straight in her chair, her hands folded over a white patent leather purse in her lap. Alison felt self-conscious in her shorts and tennis shoes. This girl was wearing a pink and white seersucker sundress with thin white anklets and patent leather shoes.

"That's a pretty dress," she said.

The girl smiled, pleased, but turned her blue eyes downward as if embarrassed. Alison thought she was exceptionally pretty.

"My name's Alison. What's yours?"

"Lucinda Richman."

"Where are you going?"

"Home---to N'Orleans."

"Where?"

"N'Orleans--Louisiana."

"Oh! New Orleens. I've never heard it said that way."

"That's the right way. You make it sound so ugly." She looked out the window.

"Sorry," Alison said. Lucinda continued to look away. "I had to move," she said. "That woman I was sitting next to smelled."

"Which one?" Lucinda turned around to look.

"In the red checked shirt on the other side."

She turned back around, shaking her long dark curls off her shoulders. "She looks like an old cow off the farm."

Alison giggled, trying to shake her short hair back. "How do you get your hair to do that?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Curl like that."

"With curlers, silly."

"I wish mine looked like that."

The conductor stopped to take their tickets. "Thank you, ladies," he said.

"Look at that cow now," Alison said. The woman was eating an apple.

Lucinda laughed. "Now she looks like a pig."

Alison laughed, too. "Listen," she said. "Do you think my hair would do that?"

"Let me see," Lucinda said. She gingerly touched Alison's hair.

"I bet it would if you'd just let it grow."

"You think so?"

"Sure. Didn't you ever have long hair?"

Alison shook her head.

"You have to take good care of it. You have to brush it a hundred strokes each night with a boar bristle brush."

"Every night?"

"Uh huh. And you have to wash it at least twice a week and set it on curlers and sit under the hair dryer."

"Even in the summer?"

"Sure."

"Can you go swimming?"

Lucinda laughed. "Of course."

Alison thought for a minute. "How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"How do you know all this?"

"My mama."

Alison sighed. She didn't think her mother knew how to do those things. She turned around to look at the woman in the red checked shirt, who was eating a banana. "Oh, look," she told Lucinda. "Now she's an ape!"

When Jo and Mother met Alison at the station, she greeted them with "Hi, y'all, how ah you?"

Mother looked at Jo who looked at Alison, half-grinning. "Why are you talking like that? You've been North, not South, stupid."

Mother kissed her hello.

"I met this terrific girl from N'Orleans on the train."

"New Orleans?" Jo said.

"She says it N'Orleans. You got it wrong."

Jo rolled her eyes.

"How are Grnadma and Grandpa?" Mother asked.

"You talked to them on the phone last night, didn't you? They're fine."

"Did you have a good time?"

"After a while it was bo-ring."

"Bo-ring?" Jo asked.

Alison crossed her eyes and wrinkled her nose at her.

"Have you seen Sandy, Mom?"

"No. She called today, though, to find out when you'd be home."

"Can I go over there?"

"After dinner."

"Sandy, do you think I'm pretty?" Alison asked. "Be honest."
They were in Sandy's room, standing in front of the mirror while Sandy brushed Alison's hair a hundred strokes.

Sandy looked at her in the glass. "I think you're cute."

"You know Linda Thompson at school?"

Sandy nodded, trying not to lose count.

"She's really pretty. Everybody likes her."

"I don't."

"Everybody pays attention to her."

"That's because she has a loud mouth and sounds like a horse when she laughs. I've lost count again."

Alison took the brush from her. "It's been more than a hundred strokes, anyway. It's your turn."

They reversed positions.

"I wish I had hair like yours," Alison said.

"I'd rather have dark hair."

"But yours is curly."

"Yours is thicker. And it's almost black."

"It is not! I don't want black hair."

"It's pretty that way. You know what you look like?"

"What?"

"Your skin is so white and your hair is so dark, you look like a china doll."

Alison studied her reflection. "I really want to be pretty."

"Well, look at me! You're ten times prettier than me. I'm fat. And you've got blue eyes."

"You're not fat."

"Then how come the boys call me Chubbs?"

"Because they're stupid. At least they notice you. They tease you because they like you."

"There are more ways than being pretty, anyway."

"More ways of what?"

Sandy shrugged. "Being noticed. What stroke are you on?"

"I haven't been counting. Maybe I'll be pretty when my hair gets long."

"I'll never be pretty." Sandy frowned at her reflection.

Alison patted her shoulder. "Yes, you will."

Alison looked through her closet for the second time. Most of her clothes were beginning to feel uncomfortably tight through the chest. She knew she needed a bra, but her mother hadn't noticed. She had begun to save her allowance a few weeks before to buy one herself, but she was still a couple of dollars short.

She finally settled on a white knit shirt, thinking it would stretch, and slipped it over her head. She looked in the mirror. The shirt made her new breasts so obvious she was almost too embarrassed to wear it, but decided to after all, hoping it would attract the attention she needed.

When she walked into the kitchen, Jo looked up from her bacon and eggs and frowned.

"Jesus, Mother, Al needs a bra."

"What?" Mother turned from the stove.

"Look."

Alison could feel her ears getting hot under the close scrutiny, but

thought her mother's face had to be redder than her own.

"So she does." She turned back to the stove. "You have some old bras, don't you, Jo? Alison can wear those for now. Here's some breakfast, Alison, Sit down and eat." Mother smiled at her as she set a plate in front of her, then turned away again.

After breakfast, Jo brought the bras to Alison's room. "Here, Al, try one of these."

Thanks, Jo." Alison felt kindly toward her sister for the first time in two years.

"You're welcome." She started to leave.

"Jo?"

"Yeah?"

"How old were you when you first starting wearing one of these?"

"Twelve. You've got a year on me."

"How did you get it?"

"I told mom I needed it and made her give me the money for it. Why?"

"Just wondered."

"See you later." She left.

A few minutes later, Mother knocked on the door. "Here, Alison, I want you to read this. I think you're old enough to understand now." She laid a book on the bed, face down, and left. Alison picked it up and turned it over. It was a copy of Growing Up and Liking It.

When she put on the bra, already too small, she felt like Black Beauty must have the first time he was haltered. She decided she would spend the money she had saved on lipstick.

II

One of Alison's earliest memories was of Mother leaving her in the Sunday School nursery of the Christian Church with the other two and three year olds where she had cried until her mother came back an hour later. When she first started to go to the services with the grownups, her favorite activity was drawing on Father's calendar. Second to that, was watching the sun shine through the stained glass window of Jesus calling the children unto him, imagining what it would have been like to be one of these children.

As she got older, she learned to quietly sit during the meditations and to try to listen to the minister during the sermons. She sang the hymns with enthusiasm and recited the Lord's prayer when it was called for.

She liked going with the family to church every Sunday. She knew almost everyone there and everyone knew her, so they greeted her and asked her how she was. It was a very comfortable place.

She had gone to church with Sandy once. She was impressed with the ornamentation of the Catholic church and with the greater majesty and ceremony. But on the whole, she felt uncomfortable, not knowing when to kneel or even whether she should, not knowing any of the responses and, since they were in Latin, not understanding them.

She took her own church's precepts for granted. God was a benevolent father who cared for and watched over his earthly children, hearing though not necessarily answering their prayers, forgiving them when they were

naughty, and loving them enough to send his only son to die for their sins. He was all powerful, He was perfection.

When she had doubts, like why a perfect God would be so self-concerned as to require worship, or how He could be so cruel as to make any human suffer like Jesus did, she pushed them out of her mind.

So when the minister of her church announced one Sunday that all children twelve or older were welcome to attend membership classes, she rushed to sign up. She didn't see any reason not to be baptized and there was one reason she especially wanted to.

One Sunday a month, the deacons would pass plates of bread and trays of thimble-shaped wine glasses. Not having been baptized, she was not allowed to take any, and she was very curious to know what they tasted like.

She went to the pastor's classes for several weeks before Easter, and on the evening of Maundy Thursday was baptized. During the service, she lined up with the other boys and girls dressed in white robes outside the baptistry. As the first boy was baptized, she shivered a little; she didn't like to put her head underwater, she didn't know how to keep water from getting up her nose.

"I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," the minister intoned.

When her turn came, the minister grasped her arm tightly, helping her into the water-filled tank.

"Alison, do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and do you accept him as Lord of your life?"

"I do," she whispered.

"I baptize thee . . ."

He leaned her backward, and she struggled, afraid of losing her footing. He pushed her down, under the water. In a few seconds, she was on her feet again, coughing the water from her nose, blinking it from her eyes.

After everyone was baptized, they dressed, towed and combed their wet hair and joined the congregation for communion. As the plates were passed, Alison placed the dry bread on her tongue and held the cup as she prayed, "Dear God, help me to follow Jesus' ways and be a good Christian. Amen."

She swallowed the grape juice and put the cup in the pew rack. The bread had been tasteless, the juice watery, and though she hadn't exactly expected them to taste good, she was surprised to feel like she had swallowed a pebble and washed it down with Kool-aid.

For Alison's twelfth birthday, Sandy decided to give her a party. They selected the guests together, two girls and four boys from their class at school. One of the girls was Linda Thompson. Sandy hadn't wanted to invite her, but Alison insisted, claiming that if she and David, her boyfriend, came, everyone else would, too. Alison especially wanted to make sure that Jay, David's best friend, showed up. Alison sat behind him in class and sometimes helped him with math. He was blond and shy, and Alison found him very appealing.

On the day of the party, Alison went early to help Sandy finish decorating the basement. Sandy's mother had baked a cake and bought soda pop and ice cream. She came downstairs to set up a card table for the refreshments just as Alison and Sandy hung the last of the crepe paper streamers.

"Girls," she said, unfolding the table legs. "I won't disturb you during the party, but I expect you to act just like you would if I were in the same room."

Alison looked at Sandy for a clue to what her mother was talking about. Sandy's face told her she'd heard it a hundred times before.

"I want you to behave like ladies. I'll be just upstairs if you need me."

"O.K., Mom."

She went upstairs.

"What does she think is going to happen?" Alison asked.

Sandy turned to her from putting a table cloth on the table. "There'll be boys here," she said, as if that explained everything.

"So?"

"Well, you know how boys are. She just wants us to be good girls."

"None of those boys'll try anything."

Sandy shrugged. "Probably not."

Alison couldn't imagine anything bad happening. All the boys she knew were too shy to even try to hold hands, except Rodney Stumph. Back in fourth grade, he had tried to kiss every girl in class.

Linda Thompson was the first to arrive, followed by Jay and David and then Thomas, the smartest boy in class, who Sandy had invited for herself. Last to arrive were Sheila and Kevin, another pair who had already claimed one another as boyfriend and girlfriend.

Sandy turned on the record player and they talked and danced. Alison was sitting next to Jay on the sofa when Linda picked up an empty coke bottle and announced, "I have an idea."

They all turned to look at her.

"Let's play spin the bottle."

"What's that?" Sandy asked, a little suspicious.

"It's a game my sister told me about. I'll show you. Everybody sit in a circle on the floor."

Alison was reluctant to obey. She didn't like Linda being the focus of things. But Jay had already moved to the floor so she sat down opposite him.

"O.K.," Linda said when everyone was in place. "I'll spin the bottle," she did so, "and whoever it points toward gets to pick another person to take in there," she pointed to the utility room, "for a kiss!"

Sheila giggled. Alison looked at Jay who was looking at her. She blushed.

The bottle had stopped, its mouth pointing toward Kevin.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Sandy said, starting to get up.

"Oh, come on, Sandy," Sheila said. "Don't be a baby."

Alison knew now this was what Sandy's mother had been talking about, but all the others seemed willing to play. "It'll be all right, Sandy," she said. "It's just a game."

Sandy looked doubtfully at Alison. When Alison nodded reassuringly, she sat back down.

Kevin took Sheila into the utility room. Alison looked at Sandy who was looking down at the floor.

"Don't take all day," David called.

They came out and Kevin spun the bottle. It pointed at Linda. "Jay," she said.

"Hey!" David protested.

Linda laughed. "I was only kidding." She and David disappeared.

They returned and the next spin pointed to David. He picked Sheila.

"Wait a second," Kevin said.

"Don't you have to go if you're picked?" Sandy asked.

"No," Linda said, frowning.

"I'll go," Sheila said.

Alison could hear them giggling in the utility room. She suspected they weren't doing anything but making Linda and Kevin jealous.

On the next spin, Jay chose Alison.

Alison went first into the utility room, and stood next to the washing machine. Jay walked over slowly, his hands in his pocket. Alison looked down at the floor. She could feel Jay very close, and just as she looked up, he kissed her on the cheek.

There was a knock on the door. Sandy called out, "Come on, Alison. We're not going to play this anymore."

Alison came out. "Why not?"

"See, Alison still wants to play," Sheila said.

Sandy ignored her. "It's just wrong, that's all."

Alison and Sandy looked at one another. Alison didn't say anything.

"Sandy's right," Linda said. "We're too young to be doing this."

"You're the one who suggested it!" Sheila said.

"It doesn't matter," Kevin said. "It's time to go home anyway."

As they began to leave, Jay took Alison aside. "I'll see you at school. Maybe we can go bike riding next weekend."

"O.K.," Alison said and smiled.

"Happy birthday."

After they left, Alison began gathering up the paper plates and empty coke bottles.

"Did he kiss you?" Sandy asked.

Alison continued what she was doing. "On the cheek."

"Oh." Sandy began to help clean up. "I'm sorry."

Alison looked at her. "Why did you stop the game?"

"I don't know. I guess I was afraid nobody would pick me."

"Thomas would have."

"He might've picked you or Sheila. Anyway, I'm not sure I would want him to kiss me. Besides," she said quietly, sitting on the couch, "when you went in there with Jay, I was afraid you would go to hell."

"What? Why?"

"It's a sin!"

Alison stopped in mid-bite of a leftover piece of cake. "Kissing?"

"Yes--and anything else. Or even thinking about it. You'll go to hell for it."

"Who said?"

"Sister Sarah."

"But I'm not Catholic."

"That doesn't matter. But you'll probably be all right since you didn't kiss him back."

"But I thought about it," Alison challenged her. "I wanted him to do it."

Sandy looked down at the floor. "I don't know then."

"I don't think it's a sin, Sandy. We weren't hurting anything. None of us were. I don't think it's wrong. Wouldn't you have done it if you'd

had the chance?"

"I don't know." She began to cry. "I just don't want you to go to hell."

Alison sat down and patted her on the shoulder. "I won't. There isn't a hell. God isn't going to punish me. I didn't hurt anybody."

Sandy stopped crying then, though she didn't look convinced.

Even if she might go to hell, Alison thought, she didn't care. She really didn't think she would and she wasn't going to waste time worrying about it.

After the party, Alison and Jay had become boyfriend and girlfriend. This didn't make much actual difference in Alison's life beyond an occasional meeting after school or a Saturday matinee movie. They didn't talk any more than usual during recess, they didn't hold hands or kiss, they didn't spend less time with their other friends. Even so, Alison felt she belonged to him, and she liked this new feeling.

But when they started junior high that fall, Alison was placed in the smartest class, Jay in the one below hers, and they began to lose touch. Alison had never felt the difference in intelligence between them before. But once the school system made it evident, she felt superior to Jay, even though she tried not to, and began to hope for the attention of a boy who sat across the aisle from her in class.

Ricky Huston was a boy everyone liked because he made wisecracks about old Mrs. Walker, their teacher, just loud enough so that those around him could hear, but soft enough that the teacher could never quite catch all he said. She often reprimanded him anyway and once sent him to the principal's office.

Alison admired him because he dared to do things she and almost everyone else was afraid to do. He wore a great deal of jewelry, including an earring in one pierced ear, giving him an exotic appearance Alison found attractive. Everyone in school knew who he was within the first two weeks of seventh grade. When she compared herself to him, Alison felt like a fly on the wall. She wanted his attention but didn't know what to do to get it.

Then for some reason she wasn't sure of, he started to notice her. One day in class, he dropped his ruler with a loud clatter, and when he leaned down to pick it up, he winked at her to let her know he'd done it on purpose.

At lunch, she was sitting with Sandy in the cafeteria when he sat next to her.

"Barfo peas, again," he said.

Alison giggled a little until she saw Sandy staring at him.

"Watch this," he said. "I've got the perfect way to hit someone with one of these and they won't even know where it came from." He picked up a pea with his fingers and put it in his mouth. He then rolled it carefully on his napkin to dry it off. "It's gotta be real clean, see, so it won't stick to the spoon. Look at Dave up there." He placed the pea on the tip of the spoon, and holding the handle between thumb and forefinger, he cocked it back and fired.

Dave was in the next row over, three tables away. Alison couldn't see the pea flying through the air, but she did see him draw back, raise his hand to the side of his head and look around.

Ricky was by then calmly eating his tuna salad sandwich. "See what I mean?" he said chewing.

Alison laughed.

"That's disgusting," Sandy said.

"Sandy, you just gotta learn how to have some fun. See ya, Alison."

He left.

"I don't know how you can like him, Alison," Sandy said.

Alison looked over at him where he was sitting by Dave, apparently taking credit for the pea incident. "I think he's cute," she said, smiling.

As she turned back to her plate, she saw Jay glaring at her. She tossed her hair back, ignoring his look.

Each Friday at lunch, the school allowed record dances in the gym. All the boys would sit in the bleachers on one side and all the girls on the other side while a student council member chose the records. Five weeks into the school year, no one had danced. Mostly they sat talking with friends, occasionally eyeing those on the other side of the room.

On the sixth Friday, the Friday following the beginning of Ricky's attention to her, Alison sat in the gym with Sandy. She looked up to try and spot him across the room and saw him walking toward her.

"Alison, will you dance with me?" he said when he got close enough.

She was shaking a little as she climbed down the bleachers. The song that was playing was slow, and she had never danced to a slow song before, though she and Sandy practiced to faster music all the time.

He took her hand and led her to the center of the gym. Someone began to applaud, and the others joined in. They put their arms around each other, and danced, slowly rocking back and forth, alone in the middle of the room. Alison felt self conscious at first, but as she scanned the

faces of the students in the gym, she began to welcome the attention.

After the song was over and another one began, more couples joined them on the floor, and Alison danced with Ricky until the bell rang.

Sandy was quiet as Alison and she got on the bus that afternoon.

"Didn't you get to dance?" Alison asked.

"Are you kidding? Who'd ask me?"

"Somebody will, Sandy. Maybe next week."

Sandy flounced into a seat and scowled out the window.

Jay and Dave walked by and Jay didn't even glance at her. When Alison and Sandy got off at their stop, they yelled out the back of the bus, "Ricky Huston is a pig!"

"Oh, shut up!" Alison yelled back, but didn't feel any better for having said it.

That Sunday, Ricky phoned her. "Alison, My parents are going to be out of town and my brothers and me are having a party next Friday. Can you come?"

"I'll ask my folks," Alison said. "It'll probably take them a couple of days to decide, so I'll let you know."

But Alison made it easy for them to decide when she made the mistake of telling her mother that Ricky's parents wouldn't be there.

"Ask your father then," her mother said.

"You know what he'll say!" Alison protested.

"It's up to him," Mother said.

When she asked, Father said, "What do you think my answer is?"

"Oh, Dad, why don't you let me grow up!" Alison said and went to her room.

She told Ricky Monday at school that she couldn't go. He asked Sally Evers instead, and he didn't pay much attention to Alison after that.

For a time after Ricky's rejection, Alison felt plain and unnoticed again, a dull sparrow alone in its nest.

She told herself she'd committed what her mother called the "sin of pride." She'd wanted more than she really deserved, and at the expense of others--Sandy, whose envy caused a loss of good will that Alison wanted to keep, and Jay, of whose feelings she had been inconsiderate--and that Ricky's rejection was her punishment.

She comforted herself that at least Sandy had gained something from the incident. She had resolved to lose twenty pounds, delighting her mother who had been trying to make her diet for years. She also began paying more attention to her hair and her clothes.

Over the next several months, Alison saw her friend emerge an attractive girl, her figure more feminine. Alison noticed that her breasts, having lost less flesh than the rest of her body, were larger than her own medium-sized ones. Her wavy blond hair, tamed by setting, shone from vigorous brushings, her brown eyes were enhanced by a touch of makeup. She didn't exactly become beautiful, but was just a little more glamorous than the other seventh grade girls.

Alison watched Sandy begin to get more attention from the boys at school. They stopped calling her Chubbs; instead they were shy and stammering when they talked to her. Alison, already feeling not quite feminine, was neutered by Sandy's new presence.

Then one day in the spring, as they sat together on the bus to school, Sandy leaned over and whispered, "I started my period."

Alison stared at her, envious. "I wish I would start mine."

"Why? It's an awful mess to put up with."

"I just want to know what it feels like."

"No, you don't," Sandy said. "Hope you can put it off as long as you can."

Alison looked out the window, watching the trees and houses go by. That was just it--she had no choice. Sandy had started and didn't want to, while she, Alison, longed to know what it was like, but could only wait, dependent on a biological clock she couldn't control. She even pictured the clock, a tiny round one, nestled among the organs it governed, set at an indeterminable time, to go off.

It went off when Alison was three weeks into eighth grade. When the bell rang dismissing her homeroom class to go to science, Sandy rushed up behind her and swiftly ushered her into the girls' bathroom.

"What is it?" Alison asked, surprised.

"You started."

"What?"

"It's all over your dress."

"What is?"

"Look." Sandy lifted the hem of the pale pink dotted swiss dress, Alison's favorite, and twisted it around so Alison could see the large reddish brown spot and the smaller one below it.

As they sneaked down the hall to the home ec room, Mr. Baxter, the principal, came around the corner. "What are you girls doing out of class?"

"Uh, Alison spilled something on her dress," Sandy said. "We were going to Mrs. Henderson's room to clean it."

The principal looked Alison up and down. "I don't see anything."

Alison turned slowly around, near tears with embarrassment.

"Oh," the principal said. "Young lady," he said to Sandy, "you go back to class. Alison can handle this alone."

"But—"

"Go on."

Sandy walked reluctantly back down the hall.

"I'll walk with you, Alison," he said, patting her shoulder, "so no one else stops you. Everything's going to be all right." She blinked and two tears spilled down her cheeks.

He ushered her down the hall and turned her over to Mrs. Henderson, who helped her rinse the stain out of her dress and iron it dry, talking with her all the while as if she did this every day. Alison began to feel more cheerful.

When they were finished, Mrs. Henderson said, "Are you all right now?"

Alison nodded. "Thanks," she said, then hugged her.

"You're welcome." She looked pleased.

Alison rejoined her class, already in Spanish, before realizing that she hadn't felt anything when her period began. And now all she felt was the chafing of the sanitary napkin pinned to her underwear. "Elephant pads" Linda Thompson called them.

When she went home that afternoon, she told Jo about it, knowing that by doing so, she wouldn't have to face the embarrassment of telling the rest of the family. She had known they knew when she came out of her room for dinner—her mother had smiled at her with an extra measure of fondness and her father had averted his eyes.

Alison felt like she'd been initiated into a secret society. She was a woman, physically at least, able to conceive and bear a child, an experience only half the population was capable of sharing. She felt more feminine, linked to the members of her sex by a common bond. She relished being female.

She examined herself frequently in the mirror, tossing back her long black hair, slowly lifting her blue eyes to look coquettishly at her reflection, pursing her lips poutily, then smiling as if delighted by something.

Sometimes she would stand naked on front of a full-length mirror, turning this way and that to look at her body. She cinched in her waist with her hands to make her hips look more rounded. Though sometimes she wished her breasts were larger, at least they were clearly visible, unlike some of the girls she knew who were flat as ironing boards.

She looked forward to a time when some boy would want to touch her and would have the courage to do it. One night she lay in bed, imagining what it would be like, imagining at length him kissing her, touching her hair, undressing her, holding her, urgently pressing against her. As she imagined, she touched herself, and the warmth flowed in her body, building and converging at a point, blocking all else from consciousness, until it was released to flow away.

Afterwards, she stared into the dark, trying to figure out what she had done, knowing that it had somehow been wrong, vowing never to do it again. She imagined God reaching down from heaven to slap her hand. But a few nights later, remembering the tickling warmth, she gave into temptation, and then again, a few nights after that, each time promising God she'd never do it again. After a while, it didn't seem so much like a sin, and she decided that if God was all-knowing, He would understand her need.

When Alison started to date, she began to look for someone who could make her feel as good as she made herself feel, and was surprised to find that most boys wanted no more than a goodnight kiss. She often double-dated with Sandy who had started going with a senior named Mark. Mark sometimes introduced Alison to his friends.

She had an especially good time with Nathan. One night when they all drove to the reservoir to park, she and Nathan were talking in the front seat, Sandy and Mark in the back. When Alison turned to say something to her friend, she saw Sandy half lying down with Mark on top of her, kissing her, his hand on one of Sandy's breasts.

Alison kept talking as if she had seen nothing, wishing Nathan would at least kiss her. Finally Mark said, "Why don't you two be quiet up there?"

Nathan laughed. "What's wrong? Can't you concentrate? Come on, Alison. Let's go for a walk."

They got out of the car and walked along the water's edge. Nathan smoked as they walked, his arm around Alison's shoulders.

"I'm glad you're not like Sandy," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"In the back seat with Mark. I wouldn't want a girl like that."

"They've been going together a long time," Alison said, then thought that was a lame defense of her friend. "I'd rather you didn't talk about her that way."

"You mean you think it's O.K.?" He looked at her, waiting.

Alison stopped walking and faced him, wanting to tell him what she really thought, but then she turned away. "Let's go back to the car," she said.

When they got there, Sandy and Mark were sitting apart, Sandy looking worried, fiddling with the door lock, Mark smoking, angrily flicking cigarette ashes out the window. "Let's go," he said to Nathan.

Alison and Nathan got in, and they drove home.

After the talk her parents had with her, Alison thought she would have to arm herself to fend the boys off.

"Alison," Mother had said, "You must be careful with boys."

"Why? Will they break?" Alison had batted here.

"You know what I mean. They'll try to do things that you shouldn't let them do. And don't go parking out at the reservoir. Boys and girls are murdered by parked cars every year."

"By each other?"

"Of course not--by crazy people! Don't let them talk you into anything you don't want to do."

"The crazy people?"

"Alison!"

"I'm only teasing you. I won't let a boy talk me into anything I don't want to do. I promise."

Mother apparently had not been reassured because Father came in shortly after to warn her. "Alison, your mother's right about boys. They'll try to get all they can."

How do you know that, Father? Alison thought, but knew better than to talk to her father that way.

"The best way to avoid an unpleasant scene is to not put yourself in a compromising position in the first place. That means no parking, no going

off alone to bedrooms at a party, no having boys over when you're here alone. Do you understand, young lady?"

"Yes, Dad, I'll be careful."

"Good. It's not that we don't trust you, Alison. We know you're a good girl."

Alison looked down.

"It's just that men will try to take advantage of a girl as beautiful as you. O.K.?" He was smiling at her.

"O.K."

After that Alison felt a little guilty about the thoughts she'd been having, but decided her parents were old-fashioned. Doing something that promised to feel so good couldn't be wrong.

Alison decided to discuss it with Sandy one day when they were shopping and stopped for a coke.

"Do you really think it's wrong?" she asked.

Sandy stirred her coke with the straw, making the ice swirl around in the glass. "I don't know."

"It doesn't hurt anybody."

"The Bible says, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'"

"But that's with somebody other than your husband." Alison paused.

"I want to do it."

Sandy looked at her. "Who with?"

"That's just it. Nobody's ever tried it with me."

"You don't give them a chance."

"What do you mean?"

"You won't go out with the same guy more than a couple of times. What do you expect?"

Alison chewed her upper lip. "You know, I was afraid to talk to you about this. I thought you would tell me not to."

"Mark wants me to do it."

"Are you going to?"

Sandy shrugged. "I don't know. We fight about it a lot."

"Are you going to get on the pill if you do?"

"It's against my religion."

Alison laughed. "And getting pregnant before you're married isn't?"

Sandy smiled, too. "You know, Jay still likes you. All you'd have to do is be a little bit nice to him."

"I can just see it. I walk up to him and say, 'Hey, Jay, you want to go to bed with me?'"

"You'll find a way if you want to."

Alison shook her head. "I don't know."

After that, she started to notice Jay more. In her Geometry class he sat a couple of rows over and in front of her, usually sprawled in his seat, legs stretched straight in front of him, chin resting on his chest, his pencil barely moving as he took notes. Alison noticed that his blond hair curled behind his ears. In Driver's Ed. he could already drive the stick shift simulator expertly, something she had not yet learned to do. He'd gotten taller since junior high, and broader through the shoulders. He'd also begun to shave.

One day she stopped him after class. "Jay, how about studying with me for the Geometry test? I'm having a little trouble with it."

He looked surprised and hesitant. "You used to help me with math," he said.

Sandy had been right. He did still like her. She laughed. "I guess I've gotten dumber. How about it?"

"O.K. Tomorrow after school?"

"Great."

The following weekend, they went to a movie, and began to see each other regularly. Alison remembered why she'd been attracted to him before. He was shy, but he also took charge, helping her on with her coat and opening doors for her, watching out for her as they walked down the street, steering her through crowds protectively. He touched her often, stroking her back or playing with a strand of her hair. When they parked at the reservoir, they talked frequently, but he kissed her as often, long, warm kisses, that made her press her body against his, searching for something more.

"Alison, I did it," Sandy told her one day at lunch, her voice somber. Alison chewed her hamburger and swallowed before answering. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

"How did it feel?"

Sandy looked away. "It hurt a little, but it was O.K."

"Did you use anything?"

She shook her head.

"Sandy!"

"It sort of happened too fast. I got tired of fighting Mark. I was afraid he was going to break up with me, so I just gave in," She paused.

"I feel so guilty. My mom would be so hurt if she knew."

Alison didn't say anything at first, then she tried to reassure her. "You don't have anything to feel guilty about. It's a natural act," she said. "Besides, it's over and done with now. Do you want your french fries?"

"No, I'm not hungry."

Alison and Jay were watching TV at his house late one Friday night when Alison said, "Have you ever made love to anyone?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Have you?"

"No," she said. "But I want to."

Jay smiled at her. "My folks are taking my brother and sister on a picnic Sunday. You could come over."

Alison smiled back. "O.K."

He kissed her, pushing her down on the couch and stretching out next to her. She could feel what was beginning to be a familiar stirring inside her. "It's not Sunday yet," she said, conscious of his parents just upstairs and wanting to have a couple of days to think over what they had decided to do.

But the two days didn't change her intentions. On Sunday morning she stood before the mirror examining her reflection critically. She'd washed her hair, but it hadn't turned out exactly as she wanted. There was a ridge in it on the right side, left from a bobby pin. She brushed it back, securing it with a red satin ribbon, thinking she could dramatically untie it when the right moment came. She'd put on her prettiest underwear, but even it looked utilitarian, not sexy. She sighed and looked at her face in the mirror.

At least she didn't have any zits. She sprayed herself with cologne.

She had pulled on her jeans and was putting on a shirt she knew Jay liked when she heard the doorbell ring. Her stomach tightened a little.

"Alison, Jay's here," her mother called.

When she came out of her room, Alison told her mother they were going for a ride.

"Drive carefully," she said. She liked Jay.

"I will," Jay told her. "Good-bye, Mrs. Carver."

"Have a good time."

Alison started to giggle as soon as they were outside. "If she only knew," she said, "what a good time we plan to have."

As soon as they were in the door of Jay's house, he turned her to him and kissed her, holding her tight.

A little frightened, she pulled away and sat on the living room couch.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I just want to take this slow, that's all."

He sat next to her and kissed her more gently, stroking the ponytail of hair.

She stopped him a second time. "Do you have anything to keep me from getting pregnant?"

"Sure."

She let him kiss her again.

"Let's go lie down," he said.

"Not yet."

"We'll just lie down together. We'll take it as slow as you want."

They went to his room, took off their shoes, and lay side by side on

the bed. At first, Jay did nothing but grin at her. "That's a little too slow," Alison said, laughing, pulling the ribbon from her hair.

He laughed, too, and kissed her, one hand buried in the silky dark hair, the other sliding down to her buttocks. Then he stopped and pulled his t-shirt over his head. She stroked his chest, hesitantly at first, then more boldly, liking its hardness.

"My turn," he said, unbuttoning her blouse. He took it off, and when he struggled with her bra, she helped him.

She closed her eyes as he touched her, enjoying it. She could hear him breathing more heavily. When she opened her eyes again, he was watching her, smiling. "You like it, don't you?" he said.

She felt as if she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "Sure. Am I not supposed to?"

He unbuttoned her jeans, and they finished undressing. Alison shivered a little as they looked at each other's bodies. He was the first male she had ever seen naked, and she wanted to examine him carefully, but she was shy about it.

"You're beautiful," Jay said.

"Can I touch you?"

He nodded. Curious, she touched his genitals with her fingertips.

"Here, like this," he said and showed her how he liked it. She touched him again, as he had showed her.

He kissed her, and Alison, conscious of his warm skin next to hers and his hands exploring her body, wanted him to lie next to her forever, just that way. But she could feel his hardness against her thigh, rubbing, insistent

"Are you ready?" he said.

She felt frightened again. "I think so."

"We'll stop if it hurts."

She nodded.

He entered her gradually, carefully. It didn't hurt and Alison relaxed.

Jay smiled and kissed her. He began to move inside her, but she didn't know how to respond to him, how to enjoy it without his help. She wanted to ask, but as she was debating whether it would be a good idea, he pressed against her a few times, extra hard, moaning softly, and it was over. He lay motionless on top of her, and she thought for a minute she would suffocate, his weight on her chest was so heavy.

It was then she became conscious of the images she often had. Yes, that's exactly how I feel, she thought. Outwardly, she was staring up at the ceiling, but inwardly all she could see was a picture of a knothole in a fence. Years would pass before she would realize she wasn't the originator of that phrase.

Jay moved off of her and she took a deep breath. He kissed her shoulder, then smiled up at her. Confused, she turned towards him and snuggled into his arms. At least he enjoyed it, she thought. That's something.

Appendix

Following Chapter II of Growing Up and Liking It, Alison goes to college, moving into adulthood as her interests turn from herself to others and to the world about her. She chooses a political science major, aspiring to change an inadequate system by working within it. Her plans are aborted by a brush with violence, closely followed by her father's premature death from heart failure.

These events give Alison her first chance to glimpse her mother as a person with needs and desires Alison never imagined. But she is frightened by what she sees and turns inward for a time, seeking protection in marriage to William, a man she has been dating.

She quits school to support William through law school. Because he requires little emotional support, he is unable to give Alison the emotional intimacy she needs. She meets another man, Dillon, with whom she becomes close friends. Through him she learns what it means to be treated as an equal by a man.

Alison's demands on and frustration with William grow until he becomes disaffected with her and seeks a divorce. Alone again, Alison returns to school. Left bitter by her experience, she refuses to have anything to do with men. She meets Barry, a man who was raised to be unemotional like William, but who has learned through much effort to give and need. She is unable to trust him initially so she continues to learn and grow alone.

She becomes friends with Carol, an older woman, divorced with children who has chosen to remain unmarried, though she has liaisons with men. She is an example for Alison of independence and self-reliance.

Sandy continues to look outside herself for happiness. She seeks answers in cultism, lesbianism, and drugs, each experience proving equally unproductive for her. Eventually she finds a man willing to take care of her and settles into a conventionally stifling marriage, still not quite happy, but believing it is the best she will ever do.

Jo and Alison resolve their sibling rivalry. Alison helps Jo and her husband through a difficult time in their marriage. Jo, resilient and fearless, learns to be a little softer and to need others a little more.

Alison gains strength as a person, and eventually willing to risk caring again, she seeks Barry out. By this time she has learned to tap her own bountiful resources and to look inside herself for happiness. She decides to try to establish with Barry what is for her a new kind of relationship. The book ends with the hope she will succeed.

Afterward

My purpose in writing Growing Up and Liking It is to explore some of the problems of growing up female in the modern world. Women who are now in their twenties and early thirties spent their teens in a period of societal transition during which feminism gained force and began to reshape their role in society. As a result, these women are often caught between two opposing psychological forces--the need to fulfill the role of being a woman as taught to them by their parents and the knowledge that this role is not what will bring them the most happiness. This opposition frequently shows itself in women who are financially and intellectually independent of men but who remain emotionally dependent on men. These women have accepted that they may choose roles other than being housewife and mother, or in the traditional female professions, but they have not learned how to find approval for themselves beyond seeking that approval in men. They become equals with men in work relationships, but not in love relationships. In the latter they remain subservient and insecure because they fear the withdrawal of approval, approval that allows them to believe that they are worthwhile, complete human beings.

A secondary consideration is growing up male during this transitional period. Man must struggle between being the emotional rocks they were brought up to be and the knowledge that this role is not healthy for them. Many are willing to let women carry their share of the financial burden of the family and to share in the cooking, cleaning, and other practicalities of everyday living, but they are unwilling and/or unable to share emotionally. They cannot be weak, and they are frequently threatened by the woman being

strong and capable. They cannot maintain a healthy balance of sometimes strong and sometimes weak, sometimes supportive and sometimes supported.

Their individual struggles often put men and woman at emotional loggerheads, each trying new roles, being sometimes strong, sometimes weak, their needs never seeming to fit one another's as they try to both meet society's demands and satisfy their own desires.

The characters in Growing Up and Liking It are representative of different aspects of this problem and the struggle to solve it. Alison is typical of the passive woman, relying on feeling rather than thinking, following the lead of stronger people. But she is also characteristically curious, an aspect of her personality that will allow her to escape the traditional role scripted for her by her parents, and to hope to find a more rewarding life.

Through this curiosity she will become increasingly aware of and have greater empathy with others, growing from a self-directed child to an other-directed adult; from a passive person whose life is shaped by others to an active person with control over her own life; from reliance primarily on feeling to reliance on thinking; from unsatisfying emotional and sexual relationships to more satisfying ones. Besides through her relationships with the other characters, her growth will be brought out by changes in the images that define her feelings.

Alison's friend Sandy is also passive, but will never learn to look inside herself for happiness instead of outside. She will follow the lead of anyone who promises a better way. Alison's sister, Jo, is atypical of the passive female. Because she is self-sufficient, she is anachronistic. She neither knows nor accepts this facet of her personality, and as a

result, she keeps others at a distance emotionally.

Carol, a woman Alison becomes friends with much later in the novel, has passed through all of these phases at one time or another. Consequently, she chooses self-sufficiency, occasionally admitting into her life those who will bring emotional intimacy, believing that steady intimacy is not worth the trouble.

Of the male characters in Growing Up and Liking It, William, Alison's husband, is a man unable to escape the stranglehold of the traditional society on his emotions. Dillon, Alison's friend, is one of the lucky few who have somehow effortlessly come by a nice blend of typically male and typically female characteristics. Barry, Alison's lover late in the book, is a man much like William emotionally, but who is able to learn emotional closeness.

The tone I have selected to convey the struggles of these characters is necessarily objective and non-judgmental. I am writing this novel partially in answer to many feminist novels I have read, stories that, in general, blame men for the existing problems. These alienate men, but I would like men to be part of my audience, as well as radical feminists and women who live traditional lives.

The problems I have had in writing this, my first novel, have seemed almost endless. Because it is my first novel, I have had trouble pacing it. In my first attempt, the pace was much like that of a short story. I tried to characterize Alison as quickly as I would have in a shorter work, not realizing at first the amount of room a novel provides to move around in. What began as five pages became nearly thirty-five, and may become longer still as I write further and get a better grasp on what my story

and characters are about. Even now Alison grows very quickly, from nine to eleven years old in Chapter I and twelve to sixteen in Chapter II. Yet I hope this will not seem too fast to the reader. Since I am aiming my story toward an adult audience, I think it is necessary to move fast enough that my readers will not feel bored by the details of Alison's childhood. As Alison approaches the period of her life when the crises that I am most concerned with occur, the pace of narration will inevitably slow. Though the first two chapters provide a necessary foundation for Alison's later behavior, they are designed to signal through a brief examination of several years that this material is prefatory.

Even with the quick pace in Chapters I and II, I found it difficult to write about Alison's childhood in a way that I thought most adults would find at least passably interesting. I was very selective in the details I chose to present; each is there for a particular purpose in relation to the whole. I am still considering making this section flashback and beginning the book at a different time, but this is a problem to be solved after the whole is written.

The tone was also difficult, particularly in dealing with the sexual aspects of the plot. Because sexuality is a large determinant in the behavior of men and women toward one another, I found it necessary to make Alison's sexual growth prominent. I wanted to highlight the sexual events in her life in a frank and honest way without the description becoming prurient. Making these events prominent also helps to show Alison's self-absorption at this stage of her life, but I had to avoid making sex so predominant, Alison seemed abnormal.

Because of the largeness of a novel, I found it difficult to conceptualize my characters. Hair color, size, and personality of any one character changed

from one page to the next, requiring that I rewrite passages to make my characters consistent. I have had to learn who they are all over again with each new scene, asking myself, How will Alison react to this? or What will Sandy do now? In writing that I have done in the past, my characters as they become more whole took over their stories eventually, making the telling much easier. This has not yet happened with Growing Up and Liking It, but I expect that it will.

Point of view has presented problems as well. Third person was required by the distance needed for my objective tone. Remaining to be decided then was the degree of omniscience. Alison is the focal character of the story, but Sandy's role is also very important. Sandy will have things happen to her that Alison can not be part of, so at first, I thought I would want to report these scenes directly, requiring greater omniscience. Yet, Alison and Sandy are not equally important characters, and this omniscience would make them so. I finally limited my omniscience to Alison, counting on my ability to work in these scenes without violating my point of view.

I have one difficulty yet to resolve having to do with setting. The time of the story must be fairly distinct, taking place during the transition brought on by the feminist movement. I thought at first I would use external events such as the Vietnam war to help show Alison's growing awareness of the world around her, but thought these events would take on greater significance than the story requires and would unnecessarily date it. As a result, time remains less distinct than I would probably like.

GROWING UP AND LIKING IT

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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ABSTRACT

This report includes the first two chapters of a novel. The protagonist, Alison Carver, age nine, discovers a booklet in the "secrets box" of her sister, Jo, titled, Growing Up and Liking It, a girl's book on menstruation and sex. Before Alison can finish reading it, Jo discovers that the contents of the box are disordered and accuses Alison of having broken into it. Their father hears them arguing and questions Alison who only admits to shaking the box. But by reading the book, Alison decides to lose her virginity as soon as she feels old enough.

In the summer when she is ten, Alison visits her grandparents who live out of town. While playing with the garden hose, half-naked, Alison discovers that her body is developing. On the train home she meets a slightly older, sophisticated girl from New Orleans with whom she discusses how to improve her appearance. When she gets home, she continues the discussion with her best friend Sandy, who is overweight. When Alison is eleven, Jo points out to their mother that Alison needs a bra, and their mother gives Alison her own copy of Growing Up and Liking It.

Because she is curious to know what communion tastes like, Alison is baptized but finds the experience disappointing. Sandy gives her a party on her twelfth birthday, their first boy-girl party. At the suggestion of one of the guests, they play spin-the-bottle. Jay, a boy Alison likes, chooses to kiss her, but Sandy stops the game, afraid that her friend will

go to hell for this sin. Jay and Alison become boyfriend and girlfriend, but when they begin junior high, Alison rejects him in favor of the attentions of Ricky. When Ricky later rejects her, Alison questions her own attractiveness, especially because Sandy has begun to lose weight and is getting more attention from boys. When Sandy starts her first menstrual period, Alison is even more envious, but not long after, she starts hers and begins to feel like a woman, with sexual needs that must be satisfied.

She and Sandy both begin to date regularly. After Alison's father warns her about boys that might try to take advantage of her, she discusses with Sandy whether sexual intercourse is a sin. Sandy tells her that her steady boyfriend wants her to have sex. Alison begins to date Jay again, and soon after, Sandy reports that she has given into her boyfriend's demands. Alison and Jay decide they, too, will make love, an experience that Alison finds unsatisfying.

An appendix follows summarizing the plot line of the rest of the novel. An Afterward discusses the purpose of, techniques used in, and problems encountered in the writing of the chapters.