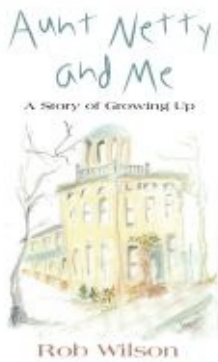


# Aunt Netty and Me

A Story of Growing Up



Rob Wilson



*Aunt Netty and Me is a brief story with lucidity and directness. It has the clarity of a fairy tale. It touches most of us, the feeling of a child that she is presently secure - but that others hold her fate in their hands. The writer tells the tale without artifice and provides subsidiary characters to enrich the deep narrative. The story thus brings back the warmth and anxiety of childhood...*

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# **Aunt Netty and Me**

**Robert G. Wilson**

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## **A Train to Newburyport**

The train smelled smoky and hot. I couldn't sleep on the hard seats. The noise and rattle of the train shook me awake. The lady tried to tell me about the sights along the way, but I didn't pay much attention.

When we finally got to Newburyport, the sun had nearly set. A crippled man met us with a horse and carriage and drove us to a big house nearby. Later, I learned the crippled man was Mr. Munroe, who worked for Aunt Netty. At the house she took me to the kitchen where I had some milk and crackers. Then she carried my things up some wide stairs to a bedroom with a four-poster bed. She said, "This will be your room, and I will be right next door. You can call me if you need anything. Don't be afraid, dear. Everything will be all right." Then she helped me get ready for bed and put my doll in with me. She left a little light on by the door. The room and the bed smelled good, but I felt so very lonely. I think I cried a little. And I thought about how Papa had run away when he was a boy.

When I woke next morning the sun shone in the open window. I could hear birds singing outside. But I missed all the confusion of my brothers and I even missed Aunt Elsie's noisy boys. The house seemed too quiet. I didn't want to be here.

But I got dressed, and Aunt Netty showed me where to wash up in the bathroom right across the hall. Then we went

downstairs to the big kitchen at the back of the house. She introduced me to her hired lady, Florence, who did all the cooking. Florence brought us a plate of eggs and bacon with fresh bread and honey. I guess I must have been hungry.

After breakfast, she showed me around the big house. Yesterday, all her clothes were black. Today, she dressed in all white. She wore a narrow skirt almost to the floor with white shoes that made her seem even taller and thinner. She had on a long white apron that had lace around the bottom. (It didn't look like an apron for working in the kitchen.) She swept her light red hair upward with a small clip holding it away from her neck. She wore glasses, but I noticed that she often wore them pushed up to the top of her head. I had never seen anyone do that before.

As she showed me the parlor and dining rooms she pointed out several paintings of her former husband. She quietly pointed out that he had died at sea, and showed me a picture of his ship. All the rooms seemed huge to me, and most had fireplaces. She showed me her favorite room, the library. It had a few big soft chairs and a huge desk with a green glass lamp on it. Books lined all the shelves. I had never seen so many books. In this room, a fireplace dominated the corner. Near it a window looked out on the garden.

At the back of the house, near the kitchen, she pointed out Florence's room. She instructed me never to go into that room unless Florence invited me. Aunt Netty said I could use almost any other room I wished, but that we usually used the parlor for guests. Then she said, "By the way, in a few weeks we are going to have some guests come in, so we'll have to get you some pretty new clothes. Would you like

that?" I felt very out of place in such a fancy house, but the thought of new clothes made me feel better.

Next, we went out the back door to the garden. I felt more comfortable there. I recognized the flowering shrubs close to the house. I think she called them lilacs. She took some scissors from her apron and picked one to show me how sweet they smelled. I said, "They make me think of home. We had some like that by our kitchen door."

Big trees shaded most of the garden. One of them had a swing hanging from a thick old branch. As we walked along the path to the barn, she pointed out apple, pear, and peach trees and a high green hedge to break the wind. Near the big barn a flowerbed had been laid out in careful rows. She said that Mr. Munroe took care of the garden and lived in the barn. I could hardly believe she called it a barn. The big white building seemed only a little smaller than the house. It had two big doors facing the street and windows on both floors. Only it didn't have that little fenced in "lighthouse" thing the main house had. When I looked up at the main house I asked her about it. "That is called a widow's walk. Many of the houses had them so the captain's wives could see down to the Merrimack River and watch for the ships to sail in. I will take you up to see ours, but not today while I have clean clothes on. It's a little dusty up there."

Then she said, "Shall we cut some flowers for the table?" She again took the scissors from her apron pocket. She let me choose the flowers, and she cut a big bunch.

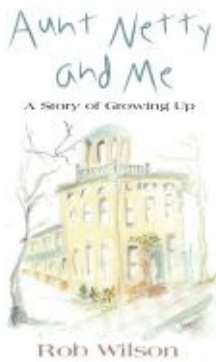
That night at supper we ate in the big dining room, just the two of us. The flowers we picked that morning decorated the table. It looked so pretty that I tried hard to be polite the way

Mama had taught me. She had a very soft voice. But I missed talking to my boisterous brothers, and I didn't know what to talk about. In one corner of the room stood a very tall clock with little steeples at the top. Every fifteen minutes, the bells played a tune, and every hour they rang out the time so loud that sometimes I had to listen hard to hear her talk. But this began a dinner ceremony that continued all the time I lived with Aunt Netty. She loved poetry and she loved reading aloud. After dessert, while she sipped coffee, she would read her favorite poems to me or to everyone at the table. Sometimes she asked me to read a poem after I finished dessert. If I stumbled on some of the words, she would gently help me, but she always wanted me to finish the whole poem. She had several poems, her favorites, which we read often. Sometimes she asked me what I thought the poem meant and we would talk about it. Sometimes she stopped to explain a word I didn't understand. But sometimes it was just a funny or nonsense poem, and we laughed together.

This first night she read a poem called "Luck" that she said had been written by a writer she knew, a woman named Abbie Farwell Brown. We read it often:

I sought a four-leaved clover, -  
The grass was gemmed with dew, -  
I searched the meadow over;  
To find a four-leaved clover;  
I was a lucky rover, -  
You sought the charm-grass, too,  
And seeking luck and clover  
I found it – finding you.





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