

MAKING PEACE, Jill Duvall

My favorite cousin Julia Ann started down the hall at my grandparent's house, tiptoeing like we were sneaking somewhere. It made me nervous, so I walked regular. We were headed to my granddad's bedroom where Mama Lottie lay in a big wooden box.

"She hasn't moved ONE INCH since they brought her here yesterday," I said. I had checked on her a few times, but she had the same look on her face and even her same dress on.

We got up next to the box. Julia Ann said, "Just pinch her real hard. That'll wake her up."

"You pinch her," I said back. "If Mama Lottie wakes up to a pinch, we're toast."

This week had been no fun so far. I had broken my arm a few days before, and was home from school with Miss Maude, my favorite babysitter. I was sitting at the kitchen table writing a love letter to Ringo Starr when the kitchen wall phone rang. Miss Maude answered the phone and then started shaking her head back and forth and started crying.

She told me Mama Lottie had gone to meet the Lord.

"Big deal," I said. "People see Jesus all the time."

She shook her head and told me next that Mama Lottie had gone to sleep and would never come back. I knew she had been very sick, but I didn't believe she'd leave forever. I'd gone to see her last month in the hospital in Little Rock and Dad had sneaked me in. She had lost all her hair and was very skinny. I wanted to cry in her room, but I waited until bedtime and wrote a long letter, under my blanket with a flashlight to Paul McCartney, about my sick grandmother.

After a while, both my parents came home from work early and packed me and my brothers up and took us to Granddad's farm house.

Once there I got real bored real fast, and got stuck in a stare looking out the back door. Even when the big black station wagon car pulled up in the driveway, I didn't blink. Five unhappy men in black suits piled out of the car and got this huge wooden box out of the back. I noticed the box was very heavy, and that's when my stomach started hurting. Right when I had talked myself into believing Mama Lottie was not in that box, I heard Dad tell my brother, "My sweet mama's in there."

They put the box in Granddad's room. Once all the adults had cleared out, I crept down the hall and listened for sounds. Sounded safe, so I walked on in.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The lid of the big box was open half way down, and Mama Lottie was lying in the box.

Hooray! I thought. I moved closer.

I could tell something was very wrong. She didn't move at all. But she didn't seem upset, so I moved closer and reached over the side. Her skin was hard and cold, but her hair and clothes felt the same. Grandma had on her favorite fancy dress that she wore last Fourth of July. It was light blue with little white flowers.

I stood there forever, staring at her. When I heard footsteps, I moved away from the box.

"Look's pretty strange, doesn't it?" my granddad said. I nodded in agreement. "She and I have shared this room for nearly forty years. Can't see the room without her."

“Does she have to go away, Granddad? Couldn’t she just stay here?” I thought it might be nice to have her around a little, even like this.

“Gosh, I wish so honey, but we’ve got to get ready to let her go. I’m trying to make peace with what’s happened.” Granddad sat down on the bed, close to the box. He stared at Grandma’s face and I left the room.

That night while I lay in bed and after I prayed to Jesus that I would marry one of the Beatles, I kept thinking about Granddad sleeping in his bed. Did he look over at the box? Did he want to take her out of there and put her back in bed? Did she want to get out? I was beginning to think that she wasn’t going to be getting up, or milking cows ever again. I couldn’t go to sleep for hours thinking about Mama Lottie in the garden shooting at black birds, or petting her best milk cow Bess. How can the voice of someone you love, that yells louder than anyone at baseball games, go silent?

The next morning Granddad’s house was full of fried chicken, deviled eggs, and more old people than I’d ever seen in my whole life. The average age of the people was one hundred and fifty.

Luckily that’s when Julia Ann showed up. We’d been sitting on the front porch, eating grape Kool-Aid popsicles when she grinned and summed up the situation by saying, “I think she’s just sleeping.” And that’s how we ended up beside the big box arguing about who was going to pinch her.

Julia Ann often won arguments by giving me a scary stare that had made me go first several times before with horrible results. Last summer during her visit, we decided to run away to New York City and become famous Broadway singers. The ground below my bedroom window was

pretty far down. At one in the morning, I got stared into jumping first. Then Julia Ann wouldn't jump. She started crying and stomping her feet and woke my Dad up.

"I jumped first last summer. It's your turn." I said with my best glare.

Julia Ann slowly put her arm over the side, squeezed her eyes shut, and then pinched

Mama Lottie's right arm. Nothing happened. We both stood transfixed. No more being hoisted up on top of her favorite cow, no more fried bologna sandwiches, no more butterfly quilts.

Right when I was about to speak, Granddad walked in and asked us if we were okay. We ran over to him and cried like babies. He picked us both up, each on one hip and held us tight. After a minute or so, he sat us down on his bed and told us that Grandma Lottie loved us very much, and she would want us to feel sad for a little while, but not go on about it. We could best honor her by being good little girls.

Then he told us to go on and play outside. I stopped at the end of the hall and looked back. He was standing beside the box and saying something, but I couldn't hear a word.

The next day Julia Ann and I decided to do some pond fishing. The wind was blowing ripples in the water and made our bobbers look like they were moving all the time. I was about to throw the bait in and give up when we heard someone crying way back in the woods.

"You hear that?" I asked Julia Ann.

"You think that's Mama Lottie's ghost crying?" she said.

“It’s not a ghost, stuppo.” I had heard that sound once before on a dark night out in the lower forty. Me and Dad had gone looking for Granddad and found him bawling and laying across the body of a dead cow.

“Let’s go back inside.”

Granddad came into the house a little while later. His eyes were all swollen and red. He sat down at the kitchen table and told my Mom that he was ready to start eating if she didn’t mind. My mom acted like that was the best news she had heard in her whole life. She fixed him a big plate of cold fried chicken, baked beans and potato salad. He ate it all and said he thought he was ready to say good-bye. My mom went over and hugged him, and then started boring us all talking about some dress she was sewing.

The morning of the funeral, the lid was still open, so I looked in again. I noticed a piece of paper tucked in the pocket of Mama Lottie’s dress. I knew it was wrong to get that piece of paper out, but I just had to. I walked real casual through the house, and up to the attic for viewing.

“My dear Lottie. Thank you for the best love affair of my life. All my love, Ellis”

I guess I knew before that moment that they were girlfriend and boyfriend, but this note confirmed it. Granddad was having the worst kind of break up. It was really over.

I went back to the box, and placed the note carefully in her pocket. I waved good-bye to her, but I knew she couldn’t see me.

Next, I don’t know why, but I knelt down beside Granddad’s bed and asked Jesus for another favor.

“Dear Jesus. It’s me again. I promised this time to be good forever for real, if you will just grant me one other thing. If it’s not too much to ask, please let my husband, Paul, George, or Ringo, write me a sweet note and tuck it in my big wooden box. Amen.”