

Rebecca

by Julia Smillie

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“Aunt Jules?” Rebecca begins from across the kitchen table, where we are drawing and coloring fashion girls. “You know what I hate?” I do. I know what she hates, because in the two weeks since my mother died, I know that the thing my five-year-old niece hates most is the sudden, incomprehensible absence of her grandmother.

But I ask her anyway. I ask, “What do you hate?” and I sit back to watch her face carefully as she bends over, penciling in the purple edges of a skirt. Maybe her answer will be different this time. Maybe she’s back to hating other things – like when your shoes don’t match or when you have to share or, on occasion, the very existence of her little sister.

“I hate it when someone you love a really, really lot has to die,” Rebecca says. She doesn’t look up. She rarely talks about this and when she does, she doesn’t like to look you in the eyes. “I know,” I tell her. “I hate that, too.”

It is a bright and sunny afternoon in Indianapolis, where we sit. Her parents are at work. Her older two siblings at school and her younger sister is napping. We have this time together, the two of us. I’m aware of how precious it is; I can practically feel its value and as she speaks, I know that her young mind is waging the same struggle as mine, trying to fathom what death means and what loss is about.

“But *why* did God take Grandma?” she asks. I look up. Perhaps I have misheard. Perhaps she is not really asking me this existential question of life, death, faith and love and expecting me to answer. For God’s sake, I’m just the babysitter! At best, I’m the slightly wacky, fun aunt who’s good for a trip to Chuck E. Cheese’s once in a while.

I don’t know how to answer this. I don’t know, for starters, what or who or if God is. But I love that Rebecca has an absolute resolute faith. I love that she truly believes that God took her grandmother. In no small way, I envy her for it. In fact, I’d give anything for her certain belief at that moment, that my mother is up in a heaven of clear blue skies and fluffy white clouds.

I don’t want to screw this up. I can see it now – Rebecca getting remanded to juvie in sixth grade because her Aunt Jules gave the wrong answer when her Grandma died. “Even though we didn’t know that Grandma was sick,” I tell her, “God did and he knew he was the only one who could make her better...” She’s watching my face, her head tilted to one side. Her skin is pale, perfect and translucent with a spray of freckles dancing across her nose. The sun from the window sets her strawberry hair aglow, golden strands sparkling throughout. She’s an amazing creature, a thing of true beauty. And she’s waiting for my answer.

“So God had to take her because he was the only one who could make her better,” I offer tentatively. But Rebecca doesn’t hear the question mark at the end of my sentence. I’m a grown up and what I’m saying to her must be true. She has no idea, for example, how full of shit I generally am. This will change in a matter of years and so I am grateful for it – until now, until the greatest loss of her young life hinges on it.

“Oh,” she says. There is a gargantuan pause, a frozen instant before she breaks our eye contact and returns to the drawings in front of her.

We color some more in silence. My fashion girl has a green skirt paired with a neon knee-high boots. For a moment, the only sound between us is Rebecca’s intent breathing and the scribble scratch of pencils on paper. I think that I am in the clear.

“So…” Rebecca begins again, shattering that notion. “So after a little while when God makes Grandma all better, then she can come back to us.” Her eyes are cast downward, her fingers scribbling furiously. It isn’t a question – but I know that as much as I don’t want to, I must provide an answer.

“Oh, honey,” I say. “I wish that were true. But Grandma isn’t coming back. She’s gone…forever.” Rebecca never stops coloring. She never looks up. She doesn’t even acknowledge my response, but I know she has heard me. I know that I have just told her something she can’t comprehend. I know, because I’ve just told her something that I can’t comprehend.

Later that night, it’s time for bed and Rebecca is reading me stories. She doesn’t know the words, but she uses the pictures in her big Disney book as cues and tells me the tales from memory. “I cannot wait until I can read,” she says.

The stories she weaves are far shorter this way and, in my opinion, much better. She tells me the tale of Sleeping Beauty and how, after years of lying asleep, she’s brought back to life by a handsome prince. She describes how Snow White chokes on the apple and is laid to rest – but only until a similar prince breathes life back into her. No wonder, I think. No wonder she doesn’t understand that death is permanent. No wonder she thinks that one day, her Grandma will come back through the door, get down on the floor with her as always and play.

After the stories, it’s time for prayers. “You say yours,” she commands, as I kneel at the edge of her bed. “Don’t listen to mine!” I promise I won’t, then realize that I’m just another grown up fibbing to a little kid. Sitting on her Hello Kitty bed sheets, Rebecca puts her hands together then buries her entire face in them. She’s whispering in a low steady voice and even as I say my own prayers aloud, I can make out what she says: “Thank you for Anne. I miss Anne. Thank you for Anne. Take care of Anne.”

It is a strange, insistent chant, made more strange by her use of my mother’s first name, and for a moment I wonder if she doesn’t understand something better than me, if she doesn’t have a direct line to somewhere I don’t even know. Somewhere I’m terrified may not exist.

When she's finished, she burrows down under her covers and blinks up at me in the dim light. I wonder if I'm supposed to bring her comfort now, if her prayers came from a place of pain that I should try to soothe. But, then again, I'm not supposed to know what her prayers were about. So I say nothing.

Our faces no more than a foot apart, I do nothing but look at her and Rebecca does an amazing thing – she looks back at me. Her chocolate brown eyes glow with an amazing warmth. As her tiny, rosy lips take the form of a beatific smile I understand that no matter whether I can name it, feel it or understand it, here in her face, is the proof of God, of love, of everything great and good that I struggle to understand. I know then, in that split second, that although I am the grown up, I'm not bringing comfort here – I am receiving it.