

Letters from the Past

By ReadWorks

In the muggy heat of late July in Washington, D.C., it is easy to remember that our nation's capital is built on top of a swamp. The temperature and the humidity battle each other to see which can reach 100 first. Businesspeople suffer through their commutes, red-faced and moist from the heat, dripping with sweat that stubbornly refuses to evaporate. Jamal and Lisa were familiar with the D.C. heat waves. Every summer they came to stay with their grandmother for the month of July. Every summer the heat was miserable. This summer was no exception.

Jamal lay on the screened-in porch, his body draped over a chair. He held a glass of sweet tea to his forehead, trying to absorb some of the cool. It was early afternoon, and his grandmother had lain down for her daily nap. The heat in the middle of the day gave her migraines, and she had learned that sleep was the best escape.

"Jamal! Jamal!" said Lisa, trying to get his attention.

"What?" he asked, irritated at the interruption.

"I'm going to sort out the attic. Want to come?" she asked, unperturbed. Lisa was two years younger than Jamal and was used to being blown off.

"You're crazy," Jamal said. "It's got to be 100 degrees up there, not to mention that it's dusty and full of spiders and who knows what else."

"Grandma said that if we see anything we want up there, we can keep it," said Lisa.

"What makes you think I want any of that old junk?" asked Jamal.

"Suit yourself," said Lisa. She went to the bedroom to change into old clothes that could get covered in sweat, dust, and possibly dead spiders.

Up in the attic, Lisa began to see Jamal's point. The heat in the house rose upwards, only to be trapped in the small attic. Everything was covered in a fine layer of dust, mummified by the passing of time and inattention.

Lisa thought briefly about turning around and heading downstairs, spending the rest of the day lounging on the porch with Jamal. Maybe they would play a game or find a movie on the television. But something pushed her to investigate the attic further. A tingling in her body suggested that in these dusty boxes stacked against the walls something important was waiting for her.

As Lisa began going through the boxes, she realized that no one had touched them for years. The first boxes held memorabilia from her grandparents' youth: old family photographs that had turned yellow around the edges, diplomas from high school and college, even pictures of a pet pig that one of her grandmother's sisters had kept for several years. Lisa came across a picture of a pretty girl with "Maud" written across the bottom. She stared at the photograph. Maud was her grandmother, and it was hard to believe that the wrinkled woman downstairs had been this laughing, vivacious girl.

She sorted through the boxes, labeling them more clearly and throwing out anything that seemed useless. After a couple of hours, Lisa's back ached, and her shirt was drenched.

"Lisa, honey!" she heard her grandmother call. "Come take a break and have some tea."

Lisa went downstairs and took the picture with her. "Grandma, is this really you?"

Her grandmother laughed. "What, you can't believe it? Yes, that's me; that was taken at my homecoming almost sixty years ago."

"You were beautiful, Grandma," said Lisa admiringly.

"You'd be surprised, Lisa," her grandmother responded. "Adults, all of us, were once young and irresponsible like you."

"I don't think Mom was ever like that..." said Lisa. She couldn't imagine her stern, hardworking mother doing anything remotely irresponsible. Her mother held the family together and took care of Lisa and Jamal. But no one would ever call her the life of a party.

"Your mother..." her grandmother's voice trailed off as she carefully chose her words. "When your father died in the service, your mother was still just a girl herself. You were a baby, and Jamal was only two. She had to grow up real fast. She loves you two so much, and that's why she's so strict."

Lisa nodded. She knew her grandmother was right. She just wished that she could see a glimpse of the fun-loving, carefree woman her mother had once been. Lisa finished her tea, thanked her grandmother, and turned to go back upstairs.

"Lisa," her grandmother called, as Lisa climbed the stairs. "There's a box of your parents' things in the corner up there. Maybe it will help you understand better."

Lisa looked through several of the boxes before she found the one her grandmother had mentioned. It was smaller than the others, with "Laura," her mother's name, written on it in cursive. When she opened the box, she found a pack of old letters, tied together with a faded blue ribbon.

Opening the first letter, she skimmed through until she saw the signature: Daryl. These were love letters between her father and her mother. Lisa's father had been in the army when he'd first met her mother, and had written her from every duty station. Lisa read through the letters voraciously. Her mother was witty and charming in the letters, teasing Daryl and citing inside jokes they had. It was a side of her mother that Lisa had never before seen. She was so full of hope, so optimistic about the life that they would have together when he returned.

Lisa took the packet of letters downstairs to the den, where her grandmother was watching TV. She curled up almost in her grandmother's lap, even though she was too old to be doing that anymore. Her grandmother put her arm around Lisa and began to stroke her hair.

"Grandma?" Lisa asked. "Will it be okay with Mom that I read the letters?"

"Oh, honey," said her grandmother. "She was the one who asked me to show them to you."