

After the service, Loulou's mother Adrian—working her sympathetic position as the eldest daughter of the deceased—ordered everyone back to the house to deal with the dragonfly situation. Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200, no tiptoeing over to the hotel to sleep off the repast. Grandma Lou's dragonfly collection spanned more than fifty years and every conceivable material (glass, ceramic, textile), and was the only thing she hadn't accounted for in any of the meticulous provisions of her last will and testament. Adrian would be damned if she was going to let everyone, all these assembled and *willing* extra hands, leave town without sorting them out first.

Nobody argued; since her ascension to the role of matriarch two days earlier, Loulou saw, Adrian had already perfected Grandma Lou's sweetly authoritative tone, had already learned to flex. She sounded like a new person. She even *looked* different, eyes bright and determined under the black fringe of a fascinator hat. "See you all there in five minutes," she said, fixing a firm look on each person in turn as they all milled around on the fresh-air side of First Baptist's ornate wooden doors.

Only Cousin Nicole, with the onyx-eyed baby thrashing on her hip, was excused to go home, her husband trailing her dutifully through the church parking lot. Everyone else piled into cars; Loulou lifted the skirt of her black dress and swung her ascetic black heels, one after the other, to slide in beside her mother. "All right," she said encouragingly. "Dragonflies."

Adrian leaned back against the driver's seat, rolled her eyes heavenward. "Those cotton-picking dragonflies," she murmured in that strange new voice, then started the car with a resolute nod. This task was far from the last of many things that needed doing, though Grandma Lou—clear-eyed through the end, and not wanting things to turn out as they had for her friend Myrna,

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whose grabby passel of nieces and nephews had given the lawyers a real field day a few years back—had more than done her part on the front end. This had featured heavily in Adrian’s eulogy this morning: the surge of admiration she’d felt for her mother when, locating a particular book on one of Grandma Lou’s shelves some weeks earlier, she’d found affixed to its title page a sticky note bearing Lou’s curling script. *For Adrian*. A volume of Dunbar poems, which Adrian alone among her siblings had appreciated as a child. It and every book on every shelf had a name stuck inside it, evidence of the deceased’s forward-thinking conscientiousness. Loulou was getting a stack of *Southern Living* cookbooks; she’d brought along an extra suitcase for carting them home. She figured they’d make for a nice artifact in her otherwise spartan kitchen, something for guests to page through while they sipped wine. While she stood at the stove and browsed recipes on the internet.

“I was thinking,” started Loulou.

Adrian tensed palpably, like she’d been shocked. “Uh-huh,” she said with a sigh. “You were thinking about what?”

It was the eulogy Loulou had been thinking about, how well it had gone; but she saw in the sudden stiffening of her mother’s shoulders that Adrian was expecting her to bring up *the thing*, the one she’d promised to tamp down into the Save for Later file for as long as Grandma Lou was still on Earth. The realization offended her so deeply that the compliment died on her lips.

“Because,” Adrian went on, “if it was about that *thing*—”

“It wasn’t,” said Loulou.

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“—I guess I feel entitled to hope we can just get through the rest of all this without having to get into that.”

“It wasn’t about that,” said Loulou. “Nice to get your vote of confidence on my tact level, though.”

Adrian fell silent, her eyes on the road. They sailed past the exit to the freeway, where in her little sedan Cousin Nicole might be cajoling her baby to nap as her husband, the good-looking and attentive man who’d bounced the baby on his knee throughout the whole service, steered them toward their row house downtown. The baby had been angel-quiet until the very end of the service, his dark eyes widening at the sound of each sob and swell in the music. *Such good manners already*, Adrian had at some point stage-whispered to Loulou, transparently meaning it as a compliment to Nicole, who hardly needed compliments.

“Okay,” said Loulou after a time. Adrian’s car crunched over Grandma Lou’s gravel driveway, pulling in just behind Uncle Charlie’s, just ahead of Aunt Roz’s. “Dragonflies.”

Inside the little brick house, Uncle Charlie and Aunt Vanessa had already chosen stations, Uncle Charlie leading his boys—young men, Loulou realized suddenly—up to the second floor to handle the moving of furniture. Over the long months of Grandma Lou’s decline, it seemed, beds and dressers had been shuffled around to accommodate medical equipment and her increasingly limited movements. Adrian and Aunt Roz had brought in a cot and taken turns sleeping by their mother’s bed—two weeks on, two weeks off. “Get it looking like normal,” Adrian called up the stairs after her brother and nephews; Uncle Charlie tossed back a focused, affirmative grunt. The older of his sons, who’d been promised the master-bedroom TV to take back to his dorm room, had the hint of a spring in his step.

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“Here’s a few of them,” said Aunt Vanessa, waving to indicate the glass dragonflies lined up along the entryway table. “What do you think, Adrian?”

They were some of her prettiest ones, chosen for that spot because of how they caught the light that came in through the front windows on sunny days. “They’d be good for someone who’s got a nice place to display them,” said Adrian.

“Your other daughter,” said Aunt Vanessa. “What’s her house like? How old are her kids now?”

“Too little,” said Loulou, though she hadn’t been asked. On her last visit to her younger sister, she’d had her glasses smashed and nearly lost a tooth playing Roll Around with her niece and nephew. She imagined, and then tried not to imagine, the glass dragonflies chipped and shattered and eventually crushed into powder on some playroom floor.

“I’ll find a place for them,” said Adrian. “Let’s wrap them up and put them away for now.”

A day earlier, she’d sent Loulou out to the hardware store for cardboard boxes and kraft paper; she now indicated with a little gesture that Loulou should go find some. Headed out to the back porch, where she’d stored them, Loulou found Aunt Stephanie in the long hallway connecting the front and rear doors of the house. “Hi, honey,” said Aunt Stephanie, and stopped what she was doing—dusting the picture frames along the walls, the painted dragonflies interspersed with portraits of the family—to wrap her arms around Loulou. “Didn’t you look nice at that service. You doing all right?”

“Doing all right.”

“Your man couldn’t make it? Is he working?”

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Loulou stepped sideways, out of the embrace. “No man right now,” she said lightly.

A little crease appeared between Aunt Stephanie’s eyebrows. “Mm,” she said. “Are your brother and sister coming later?”

“Just me,” said Loulou, and took another step toward the back porch. ““Scuse me, Aunt Stephanie.”

When she got back to the front of the house, Adrian and Aunt Vanessa had spread the glass dragonflies across the entryway table. Without talking it over, they formed a little assembly line: Aunt Vanessa wiping off stray fingerprints with a cloth, Adrian wrapping the translucent bodies in paper and handing them off to Loulou, who laid them along the bottom of one of the boxes.

“Pretty,” murmured Aunt Vanessa every so often; and then, when they were down to the last few, she turned to Loulou: “You didn’t bring what’s-his-name, the doctor, the one who came to Nicole’s wedding.”

The specimen Adrian handed Loulou at that moment had a long black proboscis that wouldn’t stay wrapped; Loulou did her best but finally let it protrude from between the folds in the paper, laying it on its back in a mostly unused corner of the box. “We broke up not long after that,” she said.

Aunt Vanessa hesitated, then said, “Well, Charlie and I broke up at least twice before we got our act together. You never know.”

“True,” said Loulou, thinking that in fact, sometimes you *did* know. According to the linked series of news bulletins she’d gotten since then, the ones from theoretically well-meaning friends and the ones that slipped through her Facebook filters, he’d *gotten his act together* and

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left for another city with someone else, someone much younger, young enough for Loulou to speculate that the leaving was probably for school or a first job. Not that there had been much credible doubt before that.

Adrian sighed loudly. “There are lots and lots of others out there,” she said, as she often had lately. She turned to Aunt Vanessa. “Have you ever heard of Eye You Eye?”

Loulou hated how she always did that, really drawing out the letters in the acronym to emphasize its pathological foreignness. They’d reached the last glass dragonfly, and Aunt Vanessa seemed to slow her fingerprint-wiping to a glacial pace. “Eye, You, Eye,” she repeated, testing the term’s familiarity in her mouth. “Give me a hint.”

“I don’t even want to tell you what it stands for,” said Adrian.

“So then don’t,” said Loulou. “I thought you didn’t want to *get into this* today.”

“Oh, IUI,” said Aunt Vanessa, finally handing over the last glass dragonfly. “I do know. That’s the one where they, you know”—and here she reached out a hand to pantomime the use of a tool, an invisible syringe or maybe a turkey baster, causing Adrian to avert her eyes in abject disgust—“up your you-know-what to make a baby. Right? What about it?”

“Here’s my next question,” said Adrian, giving the kraft paper a rough crumple. “Have you ever heard of someone doing that—*alone*—at this child’s age?”

A flush crept up Aunt Vanessa’s neck. “I did think it was for, you know, *later*.”

“Why are we talking about this?” asked Loulou. She dropped the last wrapped glass dragonfly into the box and slapped the cover flaps shut. “Glass dragonflies. Finished. What’s next?”

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Before Adrian could answer, the front door opened, and in walked Aunt Roz, a handle of vodka in the crook of her black lace-clad arm. “*Here I come to save the day,*” she announced in a singsong.

The furrow in Adrian’s brown deepened. “Ignore her,” she said to no one in particular.

“What’s next?” asked Loulou again.

Her mother handed her an empty box. “The étagère in the living room,” she said. “There are a few of them on there. Do your best to decide where they belong. Oh, and Loulou?”

Loulou stopped in the doorway.

“You know that brooch she had?” Adrian drew its shape with her finger, a subtle stone-studded thing of two inches’ width that Grandma Lou had often worn fastened at her clavicle. She waited for Loulou’s nod, then said, “Keep your eyes peeled. I couldn’t find it anywhere yesterday.”

“Okay,” said Loulou, and proceeded through the doorway. In the living room, Uncle Wood and Cousin Aqil were cleaning behind Grandma Lou’s old sofa, tossing dropped tissues and scraps of paper into the open mouth of a garbage bag. Loulou sidestepped them with her box and considered the étagère, its contents arranged as if by the hand of an expert curator. A half-pad of sticky notes and a pen were the only things out of place among the *objets*, left there by Grandma Lou herself, Loulou guessed, before she’d gotten around to labeling the dragonflies. Loulou started with a quick scan of the shelves: No brooch. She reached for a stone dragonfly figurine on the top shelf, one she recognized as having been carved by Uncle Charlie during his midlife foray into masonry. *Uncle Charlie*, she wrote on a sticky note, which she pressed onto the outside of the empty box.

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“Hey Loulou,” said Cousin Aqil, his adolescent voice tight as he strained under the weight of the sofa. “Did you hear I’m getting the Volvo?” Together, he and Uncle Wood dropped the sofa flush against the wall and began smoothing out its marled gray fabric, which Adrian and Aunt Roz had chosen for the reupholstery job once Grandma Lou had finally agreed to part with the original madras plaid.

“I heard!” said Loulou. “Congratulations.”

“There’s only like ten thousand miles on it!”

“Remind me, though,” said Uncle Wood. “What was the rule about it? What did Grandma say?”

Cousin Aqil rolled his eyes. “*B average*,” he huffed.

“At least,” added Uncle Wood.

“Sounds reasonable to me,” said Loulou, reaching for the wire-rendered swarm of dragonflies on the top shelf of the *étagère*, a souvenir from a trip to Sedona. *Aunt Roz*.

“Do you still have to do the end-of-year assessment?” Cousin Aqil wanted to know. “Do they have that where you go?”

“Ha,” she said. He had her age all wrong, was figuring it at something less than twice his own. “No, but I hear it’s tough.”

She recognized most of the pieces, but there was one she didn’t: a set of hammered copper wings on a metal stand. Taking it in hand, she followed the sound of her mother’s new voice—lifted officiously above the symphony of others—into the kitchen.

“Careful, careful, careful,” Adrian was saying. She had Cousin Kira wrapping up the china plates—not the ones from the start of Grandma Lou’s long marriage, already earmarked for

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Loulou's brother and his new bride up north; but the ones she'd bought halfway through it, silver-rimmed with a single understated dragonfly at the center of each dish.

"I haven't found that brooch yet," Loulou told the room.

"Loulou!" said Aunt Roz. "Come and talk to me."

Loulou joined her at the sideboard, where she stood pouring a batch of stingers. "Hey, Aunt Roz," she said, and held up the object in her hand. "You recognize this?"

Aunt Roz glanced over. "I gave her those wings," she said, and went back to pouring. "When she finished her master's. I'll take it with me to give to the next graduate." She offered Loulou a full glass, the white crème de menthe swirling toward its surface.

Loulou set aside the wings and took the glass; there were, by her careful count, six days of freedom left this month before at least two weeks' abstinence.

"To Mother," said Aunt Roz, lifting her own glass to touch the rim of Loulou's. "To a peaceful end and a beautiful service."

"*Peaceful,*" repeated Adrian from across the room. "Says the daughter who was three hundred miles away at the time."

Aunt Roz rolled her eyes. "Says the daughter who showed up exactly when asked. You're the one who scheduled the rotation, Louadrian."

"To Grandma Lou," cut in Loulou, and took a sip. The essence of mint tingled against her nose, sending through her a sharp memory: her grandmother kissing her forehead at the end of a long-ago visit, her finely lined hands the same color as Loulou's smooth ones. Sweet mint on her breath.

"So," said Aunt Roz. "You left Doctor Sexy at home?"

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Loulou took a long sip. “In a manner of speaking,” she said. “I left him at home for good, you might say.”

Aunt Roz’s mouth fell open. “No!”

“Hhhh,” sighed Adrian. “I told you that *months* ago, Roz.”

“You did *not*,” said Aunt Roz. “What did he do? Or was it the other way around? What did *you* do?”

Cousin Kira pretended to whack herself in the head with a china plate. “*Seriously*, Mom?”

“I want to know,” said Aunt Roz, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table. “Rights of the bereaved.”

“He didn’t do anything,” said Loulou. “The issue was what he *didn’t* do. It just wasn’t going anywhere.”

Aunt Roz’s dark eyes widened like her grandson’s had all throughout the service, as though this were a specific and salacious disclosure. “My goodness,” she said. “Well, you know about your cousin.”

She was, Loulou realized with alarm, getting ready to launch into the story of how Cousin Nicole had nailed down that husband of hers, the painstaking five-year domestication process that had, after some number of false starts, landed Aunt Roz her docile son-in-law and an onyx-eyed grandbaby. All of which, Loulou supposed, was meant to inspire the sort of hope she’d had at Cousin Nicole’s age—the sort she wasn’t so much worried about anymore. “I know,” she said quickly. “Things have a way of working out.”

“And you’re still on the right side of thirty-five, aren’t you?”

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Loulou fumbled for an answer, reluctant to get into the details. Technically, yes; but the *wrong side*, as it were, was just a beat away, better counted in weeks than in months or years. Across the room, her back to the group, Adrian let her head fall dramatically to one shoulder. “Hhhhhh,” she sighed again, piercing the faltering silence. “Roz, fix me a stinger.”

Obediently, Aunt Roz got up and began pouring another glass. “What I mean is that maybe there’s still something you can do,” she told Loulou as she stirred. “Maybe not overnight, but in the long term. Nicole had to break down and learn to cook, for example.”

Loulou bristled. “I can cook.”

“You still have that apartment and that roommate?”

Loulou set down her glass and picked up the dragonflies, taking a step toward the door. “Apartment, yes; roommate, no,” she said wearily. The roommate had gotten engaged and moved away, but still emailed periodically to see how *the thing* was going. (*Not going*, Loulou had most recently written back. *At my mom’s request, that and the rest of my life are on hold at the moment. My grandma down south isn’t doing well. Can’t do anything to upset her.*)

“You need a bigger place,” said Aunt Roz, giving the sideboard a *Eureka!* of a slap. “Men don’t like being all crammed in like cotton-picking sardines.”

“She doesn’t care about that,” said Adrian, and came over to get her glass before Aunt Roz could even drop the mint sprig into it. “Just wait till you hear what this child has decided to do instead of trying to make things work with a nice man.”

Loulou marched out of the room and took the stairs two at a time, but not quickly enough to avoid hearing Aunt Roz from the landing between floors: “What on earth is Eye You Eye, Louadrian?”

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Upstairs, Uncle Charlie and his sons had finished restoring the master bedroom to its pre-hospice state; the bedside cot Grandma Lou's daughters had shared in turns was gone, the TV and all its accessories unplugged from the wall in preparation for their new life in Cousin Caleb's dorm room. The bed had been stripped of the outmoded linens Loulou had last seen on it, Grandma Lou's favorites since the seventies, and made up again in crisp unused sheets and a bright jewel-toned quilt. There were the scent of fresh paint and dabs of it visible at intervals along the buttercream walls. From floor to ceiling, the room looked brand new.

Other than the dragonflies. Loulou approached her grandmother's dresser and saw that these were the more sentimental installments in the collection, homespun items not quite right for the elegant displays on the ground floor. Among them was a crude small dragonfly statuette Loulou had made herself in elementary school, still intact and bearing her little-girl fingerprints in the glossy yellow paint. Kept, all this time, along with a few other crafts she recognized as her own and those of her siblings and cousins. Tucked inside the pages of a photo album were dragonflies done in crayon and colored pencil and tempera paint, various grandchildren's names added in Grandma Lou's own handwriting where they hadn't been included initially. On the buttercream wall above it all hung a showy dragonfly-shaped panel of beaded lace in a frame speckled with crystals. Loulou moved along the edge of the dresser, taking in each of the objects one at a time—

Beneath her left foot, there was a *crunch*; and then, unable to shift her weight fast enough to avoid it, she landed heavily and felt her thick black heel flatten against the hardwood floor. She saw it in her mind's eye first, the crushed brooch, and when she managed to look, it was

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exactly as she'd guessed: antennae snapped off, smashed wings asymmetrical, peridot tail stones loosed from their settings. A fine pale green dust coated the underside of her heel.

Later, adopting her former roommate's glass-half-full reaction to this part of the story, she would learn to include in her retellings some quip about how glad she was to have been wearing cheap old shoes with heels fit for a nun; anything nicer, with a sleeker shape, and she'd have twisted an ankle or—worse, and more likely—removed them the moment she'd walked through Grandma Lou's front door after the service and been barefoot by this point, tearing up her foot instead. She'd caught her mother's judgmental eye that morning and knew these shoes bordered on the inexcusably unfashionable, almost a disrespect to the memory of her elegant late grandmother. But new shoes hadn't been in this trip's budget, which had barely allowed for a round-trip plane ticket; three failed intrauterine insemination rounds had cost her over four thousand dollars in the months before Grandma Lou's illness, and this upcoming round—which would not be the last—was another three-figure hit (though by now she'd stripped the process down to its bare bones, a drugstore syringe and stuff hastily ordered from the airport off of a website that seamlessly matched women with sperm donors at no surcharge—at the expense of reassuring FDA approval). *Glass half full*, it was better to have destroyed the brooch (whose little stones, it would turn out, could be salvaged and turned into what would become her nicest pair of earrings) than her foot, especially at a time when antibiotics were near the top of a long list of things to avoid consuming. A good thing, really.

But for now: “Fucking *shit*,” she said, narrowly missing the brooch a second time as she stamped her foot on the hardwood floor. The dragonflies rattled on the unsteady dresser.

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Back on the ground floor, the framed panel under her arm, she detoured through the living room and swept gnarled bits of metal from her hand into the garbage bag Uncle Wood and Cousin Aqil had left behind. The kitchen was alive with the voices of Grandma Lou's assembled offspring, and someone had put on one of her crackling old Earth, Wind, and Fire records. *You can try*, said her voice in the ear of Loulou's memory, *but you can't keep Negroes out of the kitchen*. Loulou peeked in and saw that the rest of the aunts and uncles and cousins had joined her mother and aunt around the kitchen table, that more stingers had been poured.

Aunt Roz spotted her in the doorway and slid over to make a space for her on the edge of her chair. "Find anything good?" she asked under the cacophony of voices. She peered at the object under Loulou's arm. "Is that the thing with the lace and the lace and the beads? Your cousin Nicole made that at summer camp."

"Ah," said Loulou, not taking the seat she'd been offered. "I thought maybe so. Is she coming by soon to help out?"

"Not today, I don't think. The baby won't sleep. They'll come by tomorrow or the next day, to take a look around."

Loulou frowned. "We'll be all done here by then, won't we?"

"Hopefully, so they can move in right after your mother flies home."

"Move in?" Loulou looked over at Adrian, who was talking to Uncle Charlie about emptying the aging contents of the refrigerator. "Mom," she said, waving her hands to catch Adrian's eye, not caring that she was interrupting. "Mom!"

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Adrian frowned and stopped talking, dispatching Uncle Charlie with a pat on the shoulder; he opened the refrigerator and began tossing old condiments into a nearby trashcan.

“What, Loulou?” said Adrian.

A little storm was brewing in Loulou’s gut. She walked over to her mother, arms folded. “You didn’t tell me Nicole was moving in here.”

“Sure I did,” said Adrian, lifting an eyebrow. “Maybe you were distracted and forgot.”

“So it’s hers now?”

“It’s mine and Aunt Roz’s and Uncle Charlie’s. Nicole and them need the space. Your grandmother would be thrilled to have them use it. A yard for that baby to play in and everything.”

Loulou stared back at Adrian, understanding suddenly that the unfamiliar quality in her mother’s voice was more than just the assertiveness of a new matriarch; that in the months she’d spent traveling back and forth to her hometown, nursing her mother to a peaceful end, Adrian had actually lapsed into a shade of her old drawl, the depth of which had faded in the decades since she’d moved away.

“We don’t want to just leave it untended,” Adrian continued. “You know how hard your grandparents worked to get this house paid off? What I want to know”—and now Loulou noticed the hint of a quaver in her mother’s voice, the same voice that had carried this morning’s eulogy steadily through to its impressive finish—“is what you think is going to happen to your father and me and *our* things when it’s *our* turn, how you’re going to manage all that while you’re out messing around with Eye You Eye.”

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Loulou kept staring till it dissipated, the urge to strike out at the incredible faultiness in this chain of logic. She folded her arms and rolled her eyes heavenward. “Okay, Mom,” she said softly.

Aunt Roz appeared at Adrian’s side, sipping at a fresh stinger. “You find that brooch?” she asked Loulou. She turned to Adrian. “You tell her she gets to keep it when it turns up?”

“No,” said Loulou, turning on her boxy heel. “I’ll keep looking around.”

Behind her, Adrian heaved another deep sigh. “She’s mad at me,” she told Aunt Roz in a stage whisper. “For telling her it’s foolishness to do it all out of order like that.”

“My goodness,” said Aunt Roz as Loulou hurried from the kitchen, but not quickly enough to avoid hearing the end of it from the door to the back porch. “These children. What I’ll never understand is why such a cotton-picking *hurry*.”