

Whereabouts Are We?

"Lord, child," hollers Aunt Imo, ducking around the patched screen door, "don't come bringing Mommer to me! I got my hands full." She spits into a bush of dusty-blue hydrangeas while she's out there.

Luzanne has one foot through the door of her old yellow Corvair and starts to get back in, but when she glances over at her shriveled Grannie on the other side, she hangs there.

The old lady is nursing a white Dixie spit cup, nested with Kleenex. She is so tiny that the top of her age-yellowed head draws level with the split black dash. Cradled in the bucket seat, she fidgets with a wadded white handkerchief, legs stuck out like a doll's.

"We just come by for a little visit, Aunt Imo," calls Luzanne. She trots around the car to the back door, opens it and takes out her Grannie's metal walker. Then she wrests with the stuck latch of the front door till it swings wide. "Come on, Grannie, let's go in."

Aunt Imo is now standing pouty thick on the screened porch. Her hands are braced on her boxy sides. She is staring off at the side yard where a Silver Stream travel trailer is parked among a grove of scrub oaks no taller than a crop of

prime dog fennels. Except for one towering sweetgum that shades the long low house, a sort of lean-to with turquoise slats on the screen squares of the porch. Her house sits sideways on the end of the gravel road, facing the side of the next house, and is backed by gum woods.

Luzanne takes Grannie's arm, a bone dipped in mushy flesh, and tugs gently. "Take your time, Grannie."

The old lady raises her scabby yellowed face--she has bad skin cancers, though not bad enough to carry her out of this world. The doctors in Macon have patched her up and given her some salve for the sores, and they shine like wet gator hide in the curried summer light.

She'll be 97 next month, first of August, Lord willing.

"Where we at?" she asks and screws her mouth with her hankie.

Luzanne shouts, "We at Aunt Imo's, Grannie," and yanks at the brittle arm.

The old lady's hazel owl eyes seek a peep space around the open door. "Imo's you say?"

"Yessum."

Aunt Imo steps out to the half-buried brick walk on big bare feet and crosses her arms under her drooped bosom. She has dark stuffed skin, smooth and hairless. "Mommer, y'all come on in." She brushes a fine loose hair toward the brown bun on the back of her head.

The old lady has made a little progress, has shifted around on the wooly seat and has one blue terry slipper dangling out the door.

Luzanne, still holding to her arm, reaches down and catches the other foot and wrenches it around the seat.

"Ooch!" the old lady says, sitting like a child on a potty.

"That hurtcha, Grannie?" says Luzanne.

The old lady's nickel-rimmed eyes set on Luzanne's. "I hate to be a bother to my family."

"You ain't, Grannie." Luzanne, at her back, handles her around the rib cage, which is surprisingly fleshy. Grannie's arms and legs are sticks. "See, yonder's Aunt Imo."

"My pocketbook," says the old lady and birrs against the bracket of hands. "Where's my pocketbook?"

Luzanne frames Grannie in the walker and reaches into the floor of the car and frees the bone triangular pocketbook from the trap of toys and trash. She takes it to Grannie and threads her crooked arm through the strap and hooks her claw-like fingers to the top rung of the walker.

Poising Grannie by holding under her arms, Luzanne points her toward Aunt Imo, who is waiting on the walk in her faded sack-print shift: red Robin Hoods in action.

"How you getting along, Mommer?" Aunt Imo says.

The old lady clops the metal walker around a mended speckled pot of pink sultana, tottling behind it. "Ain't so good," she says and laughs, a rattle in her pea-shaped head. Her white hair is stained yellow, polleny stubbles, like a bad wig.

Aunt Imo kisses the old lady on the lips, then hugs her tight. "I do love you, Mommer, Lord knows I do."

"And I love you too," says the old lady, stretching tall in Aunt Imo's grasp, then shrinking again to nothing as she lets go. "I love all my children."

"Yessum," says Aunt Imo, done with loving, and pivots with her broad flat back to Grannie and Luzanne. "Y'all come on in if you can get in."

The old lady stops on the brick walk and speaks to a stout yellow cat. "Whereabouts are we?"

"We at Aunt Imo's, Grannie," says Luzanne, muffling a snicker, and steers her toward the concrete block doorsteps, laid one, two, three. Morning glory tunnels through the matched hollows of the blocks.

"Francine ain't got no business sending her to me." Aunt Imo brushes her feet on the rag mat and passes through the screen door to the low-ceiled porch and on into the front room, similarly ceiled--squares of white plyboard with dark grouts.

From outside, you can see the long kitchen table and the white stove behind it. A platter of fried salmon patties sits between the dual stove eyes, decked with assorted pots.

Aunt Imo, at the stove now, calming the hissing blue fire of an eye to a whisper, is still talking. "Reckon y'all heared about Emmacee Mae."

Luzanne has wrenched the old lady and her walker onto the porch and hobbles with her toward the kitchen door.

"I do wish Francine and them would a-give me time...to change out of my night gown," Grannie mumbles.

"You all right, Grannie." Luzanne is almost across the raised board threshold and onto the blue linoleum where the prints of the boards beneath have transferred through in snuffy streaks.

The old lady's brushed polyester purple gown is hiked under her white sweater with flower petals of pearls along the front. Her hardened ankles are starred with dirty-rose veinbursts.

"You doing fine, Grannie," says Luzanne, almost there.

"Emmacee, honey, look, it's Grannie," says Aunt Imo loudly, bending over the long couch placed next to the stove. "She come by to see you. Just for a minute."

Emmacee is sprawled back on the couch, staring up at the bare bulb in the stark ceiling. Her green-rimmed pupils are fixed like tacks on styrofoam. Her drab blonde hair frizzes around her long thin face and mats in strands on her jointed neck. A plate of scattered tomatoes-and-rice and a broken salmon pattie sits on the lap of her chartreuse jumpsuit, which has a huge zipper up the front. One hand grips the handle of a spoon, bowl resting on her plate, and the other hangs in a loose

fist by her side. Her long straight legs stick out and her yellow toes nest like new mice.

Aunt Imo picks up Emmacee's hand with the spoon and scoops some tomatoes-and-rice and guides it to her slack drooling mouth. Emmacee's pale lips wiggle, her eyes bat, she smacks. Aunt Imo scrapes the dribble of red rice with the spoon and places it on the plate. Then she settles in next to Emmacee.

"She was took bad this time, bad." Aunt Imo purses her lips, dips forward, and spits into a Crisco can by her bloated crossed ankles. "Old stroke, the doctors said."

The long living room/kitchen opens into a bathroom on the end near the porch. There's an orange douche bag hung over the large white tub, and a cage with a yellow-green parakeet sits on a stand between the tub and the commode. The other end of the room leads into a bedroom with two double beds made up wrinkle-free with white chenille spreads. Wedged in the walk-space between beds, a narrow white cooktable with a red scrolled border is set for two: two plates, two forks, two spoons, and two empty pint fruit jars. Two ladder-back chairs are pushed to the table on each end.

Luzanne has maneuvered Grannie to the long kitchen table before the stove and steadies her while she pulls out a chair with a cowhide bottom. "Set here, Grannie."

The parakeet twitters nervously from the bathroom.

The old lady skiffles around and eyes the chair, backs up and sits with her pocketbook on her lap. She wobbles. Luzanne places the walker like a cage in front and goes around and behind to shore up her shoulders.

The yellow cat flows into the room and sidles around Grannie's legs with its periscoping tail held high.

The parakeet pecks at its bars, then flits to its perch, a miniature trapeze, and rings a bell.

"Lord a-mercy, I ain't thinking!" says Aunt Imo. "Mommer could a-set right here by me." She pats the couch and leaves her hand there. "I wish to my Lord it was so I could just keep Mommer," she says to Luzanne while looking at Grannie. "I told Francine as much, but with my own youngun in such a fix, took with a stroke...."

Aunt Imo reaches across and tries to feed Emmacee a few golden crumbs of the salmon pattie. Emmacee's long pink tongue snakes out and draws back inside. She swallows.

"Can't hold nothing on her stomach," Aunt Imo says. "No appetite."

"Ain't she living in her housetrailer out yonder nomore?" says Luzanne.

Aunt Imo crosses her arms, her greedy lips harden. "Belongs to be." She doubles over and spits; the dry skin of her crossed ankles rasps. "Welfare wouldn't give us a cent if they was to catch her living here with me."

"Bet they would if they seen her in that shape," says Luzanne.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you, honey?" Aunt Imo turns her thick face to Emmacee, who still stares at the ceiling. "Mind ain't never been all that good nohow; now I even have to take her to wee-wee. What's got me down in the back."

Grannie mumbles and stands her triangular bone pocketbook on her lap. The crown of her skimpy yellow head just reaches the top of the chair back.

"What you want, Grannie?" Luzanne ducks to Grannie, her brown curly hair cancelling the elfin face. "Says she wants to stay right here till Aunt Francine gets back from the hospital," Luzanne tells Aunt Imo.

The yellow cat curls on Grannie's feet.

Aunt Imo cups her hand to one side of her mouth and hisses. "Francine ain't nomore in the hospital than I am. Gone to the beach, I got all idears." She winks, her mouth screws. She sits up, hardened gray soles flat on the floor, palms in praying position. "Mommer, honey, you know good and well if I could keep you I would--I would in a heartbeat. But you can see what shape poor lil ole Emmacee's in, can't you now?"

The old lady spits in her Dixie cup and mumbles again.

"What's she saying, sugar?" Aunt Imo asks.

Luzanne's rich brown hair again hides the old lady's face. "Says how long's Emmacee Mae been took like that?"

Aunt Imo sits back and crosses her smooth hairless legs. "Three weeks ago tomorrow, Mommer, Sunday week." She studies Emmacee, still lolled with the plate on her lap. Her eyes are closed now, showing waxy white lids.

The parakeet flutters, the cage rattles, the bell rings.

They all watch Emmacee while the wind-up clock ticks down on the square table at the end of the couch.

Aunt Imo suddenly jumps up and pads to the stove and cuts off the fire under a pot. "Honey, I bet y'all ain't eat a mouthful all day. Is Mommer eat yet?"

"I don't know; I just picked her up two hours ago."

Luzanne bows low over the old lady. "You hungry, Grannie?" She listens with large staring eyes, then relays the answer to Aunt Imo, "Says she ain't all that hungry but she could eat a bite and says..."

"Well, I'll just fix her a plate, bless her ole heart."

Aunt Imo slaps a salmon pattie on a crazed white plate, dips a serving each of steamed cabbage and tomatoes-and-rice and breaks off a corner of fried cornbread. The Robin Hood repeats on the print of her shift shimmy across her broad backside.

Luzanne finishes, "Says she wants me to go get her suitcase out of the car."

Aunt Imo whirls around and flattens both hands on the white sheet tablecloth. "Mommer, honey, I can't keep you this time-- Lord knows I wished I could. Why don't you eat a little dinner and I'll call up Moavie and see if she can't take you till Francine gets back from the beach."

"She went to the hospital, Aunt Imo," says Luzanne, pulling out a chair and perching. "And Mama's got a new boyfriend, ain't got but one bed in her housetrailer."

"She looks like a boyfriend!" says Aunt Imo. "Give me a minute and I'm gone call her up and give her a piece of my mind. She can tell me to my face she can't keep her own mommer. Me and Francine's done our part--yeah, I know Francine's done the biggest part and it ain't fair, it all on her. But I been down in my back, and now Emmacee.

"Why, you see that table yonder?" She points to the set table in the bedroom. "When the welfare lady comes by, I have to make like Bobo and Suellen have set up housekeeping here. Like they're living here with me in their own quarters, so I can draw my foodstamps. A little dab to be sure.

"And talk about no beds!" She points to the couch and stops talking, seems to have clipped all links connected to thoughts in her head. Her bland face flushes and her trenched nape pinks beneath broken tendrils freed from the bun. She swipes at her skirt with the backs of her hands and minces flat-footed to the couch, jerks the plate off Emmacee's lap and gets down on her knees. "Done spilt it, I declare." On all fours now, she brushes at imaginary crumbs like Jesus erasing what's written in the sand.

When she gets back with the plate, empty except for a few soupy red grains of rice, she drops it in the dishpan under the large mullioned window set in sideways--a mural of green viney woods.

She gets Grannie's plate off the stove and places it before her. Then huffily she takes up the spoon, paring tiny crescents of the salmon patty. Done, she stares the age-yellowed old lady

square in the eye. "Mommer, don't you want to go to Luzanne's house?"

"I been trying to get her to go home with me," says Luzanne, "but she says she wants to be at one of her own daughter's when her time comes."

Luzanne leans close to Grannie. "Will you go to my house, Grannie?"

"What, child?"

"You wanta go home with me, Grannie?"

The old lady cups a liver-pied hand over Luzanne's. "I would, honey, but I want to be at my own daughter's when I'm took."

Aunt Imo's hazel eyes stay on Grannie, now eating in tiny bites with her floweret sprinkled ankles crossed and the yellow cat measuring the hem of her purple gown with its tail.

"Poor ole Mommer," says Aunt Imo, "nobody don't want her but me, and I can't take her."

Emmacee begins groaning and twisting, but stays in the same spot.

"I'm a-coming, honey, Mommer's coming," says Aunt Imo, smartly flouncing across the linoleum. "Gotta go wee-wee, I bet."

She bends over and whispers with her soft cotton shift hiked, then laces an arm around Emmacee's back and half-drags, half-walks the moaning, drooling old girl across the linoleum, between the stove and the table to the bathroom. Emmacee's green eyes roll, her long legs scissor, her feet drag. Her legs scissor, her feet drag.

The bathroom door closes and they start hissing and whispering before the latch has time to click. Something rubbery slaps the door. "I cain't just set there like that, you try it." The commode flushes, the parakeet screeches. "Least you could turn on the radio." Flesh splats. Somebody shrieks. "You stay put or else!" Aunt Imo. You can almost hear her teeth grit. Then quiet.

In a few minutes, the door opens and Aunt Imo half-drags, half-walks Emmacee out, the hose of the rubber douche bag tangling on her ankles. She shakes it off in the doorway. This time, Aunt Imo places Emmacee on her side, facing the back of the couch with her knees drawn. Her dirty soles press out. Her feet are as trim as wooden shoetrees.

Aunt Imo brushes back that same stubborn strand of hair to the bun, with its brown mesh rattail peeking through and hair pins sticking up like bad wires on a hot plate.

She doesn't look at Luzanne and Grannie, heads straight for the bathroom and kicks the orange douche bag inside and slams the door. The parakeet screeches, the door flaps open. Aunt Imo goes on to the dishpan and starts washing dishes.

"Worse thing I ever done," she says, "was teach that old bird how to talk."

After dinner, after Aunt Imo has fed everybody and herself, she sits stuffed and cross on the end of the couch, holding Emmacee Mae's feet while she sleeps. On her back now, with her hands placed on her chest, Emmacee looks like a corpse.

Grannie still sits in the chair at the table, though she's been turned facing out. Luzanne beside her. A fresh dip of snuff in Grannie's mouth, she alternately spits in the Dixie cup and wipes under her nose and nods. Satisfied, while the purring cat sleeps curled around the back of her heels.

Overhead, the sun ticks down on the tin roof, birds sing in the sweetgums, and the yellow-green parakeet in the bathroom mimics the chirring of crickets.

A car door claps out front.

"Somebody's here, Aunt Imo," says Luzanne, stretching high to see over pots of flowers on the screen ledges of the porch.

"That'll about be Suellen and Bobo, bringing my groceries," Aunt Imo says with her head back.

"No'um," says Luzanne, "it's a woman toting a black case."

Before feet scrape on the concrete doorsteps, Aunt Imo is up and running for the door, fussing with her hair while gazing back at Emmacee and then the bedroom. "Lord a-mercy!" she hisses. "It's that old welfare woman. Luzanne, run on out there and get Mommer's suitcase, you hear."

She switches faces and tones as she bounds to the door of the porch, talking through the screen to the welfare woman.

"Come on in if you can get in."

"How you doing, Miss Imo?" says the woman, on the porch now with Aunt Imo.

"Ain't so good," says Aunt Imo. "How you getting on?"

Luzanne starts out the door to the porch.

"Miss Hogan, this here's my sister Moavie's girl," says Aunt Imo, spitting around the screen door and ducking back flushed. "Come to bring mommer back from Francine's."

"Howdy do," says the round woman. Her black hair is parted down the middle and pinned flat over tiny white ears.

"Yessum," says Aunt Imo, "looks like Macon don't agree with Mommer. But it was good of Francine to take her for a few days.

"Run along now, sugar, and get Mommer's stuff out of the car," Aunt Imo says to Luzanne, who is sidestepping between chairs and potted plants and the two stout women taking up most of the space on the narrow porch.

"Reckon you heared about Emmacee Mae having a stroke," Aunt Imo says to the woman.

The welfare woman sits in a chair beside Grannie, writing on a yellow pad with one foot crossed behind the other. Aunt Imo is wedged in her spot at the end of the couch. All of them viewing Emmacee, laid out with her waxy lids twitching.

Luzanne lugs the tweedy gray suitcase in and sets it by the table and takes her place on the other side of Grannie.

"Miss Imo," says the welfare lady, "you don't reckon Emmacee's gone into a coma?"

"Can't never tell, honey," says Aunt Imo. "Doctors said she might could."

The welfare woman writes on her yellow pad. "What's her doctors' names?"

"Lord, child," says Aunt Imo, rubbing her bowl forehead, "I'll have to look it up and get back to you."

The woman twiddles her pen on the pad. "Say your mama's living here all the time now, right?"

"Yessum," says Aunt Imo, shifting against the pressure of Emmacee's soles. "Course, with Emmacee in such a shape I might have to get Francine and Moavie to take her for a day now and then."

"I see," says the woman, watching Grannie doze with her chin on her chest. "So she might be with her other girls some of the time."

"Just when I have to run Emmacee to the doctor and all."

"Bobo and Suellen," says the woman, turning to eye the bedroom, "they still living with you I guess."

"Yessum," says Aunt Imo, crossing her legs and laying into the couch arm, "gone to town to pick up some groceries right now. But they living with me, shore are."

"Well," says the woman, getting up, "get me the name of Emmacee's doctors and I'll see what I can do about upping your foodstamps and all."

"I'll get right on it," says Aunt Imo, rising and seeing her to the door. Her Robin Hood print dress is stuck to her sweaty back.

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Sun still shining, a shower dances up out of the woods behind Aunt Imo's house and beats out a sweet rhythm on the tin roof. The briny smell of damp dust sifts through the porch screen and courses into the kitchen where Grannie sits gazing out. She looks charmed, her age-yellowed face calm though cavernous. Her pocketbook is on the floor by her worn suitcase. She strokes the yellow cat on her lap. It purrs. Emmacee snores.

Luzanne, in a chair, faces Aunt Imo on the couch. They both watch Grannie at the end of the table, who is used to sitting that way at Francine's house: in her own corner by a gas space heater with a picture calendar on the wall, a clock beside it with an angel's wings for hands.

The rain lets up, though a few drops drip from the sweetgum leaves to the tin and trail down the corrugated eaves to twinkling sandy gullies.

"What went with your little kitty, Mommer?" says Aunt Imo.

Luzanne answers for Grannie. "Aunt Francine took him off."

Nothing is changed by the welfare woman's visit, but in deference to Grannie and the rhythm of the rain, Aunt Imo and Luzanne have put all business on hold till the shower ends.

Then Aunt Imo starts. "I'm gone call up Moavie." She stands and tips to the square table with the slow-ticking clock and the black phone and opens a blue notebook, running her finger down the page. She licks her finger and turns another page, running names and numbers. Her finger stops. She dials, a lazy spring-back grating. She puts the receiver to her ear, discovering the loose hair pins, and while she talks, she punches them into the bun.

Luzanne gets up and goes into the bathroom, closing the door.

"How you doing, Moavie?" Aunt Imo pauses. "That so?" Pause. "No, I didn't know that, I..." She waits, switching ears. "Listen, honey, Luzanne's here with Mommer. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, she took her off Francine's hands for the weekend, can't get her to go home with her. So... Yeah, I know, sugar." She laughs, her broad body quakes, bun to buttocks. "Me too. Yeah, yeah, yeah." She waits, straightening the Holy Bible on the table, picking at the starched points of the crocheted table scarf. "Reckon you heared about Emmacee." She waits. "She had herself a stroke." She watches Emmacee, who has rolled over, still sleeping with her hands clasped beneath a sallow pouched cheek. Her mouth is open, the undersides of her pink lips glisten wet.

"Listen, sugar," Aunt Imo says, turning her attention to Grannie now, "it'd shore be a help to me if you'd take her, I..." She pauses. "Yeah, yeah, I can imagine..."

The fat yellow cat stands on Grannie's lap, arches its back and hops softly to the floor and spirits out on the porch.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty," Grannie calls. "Come on back here, kitty."

The old lady braces on the rim of the walker and struggles to her feet, blue terry slippers scuffing across the linoleum. She smiles, her hazel eyes bleaching in the door-shape of sunshine. Her hair turns to gold. She holds out one hand. "Here, kitty-kitty." She skiffles up to the raised threshold and trips and drops to her knees, going down in a puff of air. "Here kitty-kitty."

"Like I was saying, I'd shore prechate it if you'd take her....just a minute, Moavie." Aunt Imo chins the mouthpiece of the phone and goes white. "Mommer! Mommer!" she yells, lowering the receiver to her side, and watches the old lady rock on her knees. Then into the phone again, Aunt Imo says, "Never mind, Moavie."

The cat, sunning on the ledge of the porch, hops down and glides before Grannie's raised face, its tail caressing her chin. Then it circles back to the puddle of sunshine on the end of the porch.

The old lady follows, crawling slowly, one blue slipper on the threshold, the other before the screen door. When she gets to the cat, she curls up beside it and closes her eyes.